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POESÍA CH'OL CON PERSPECTIVA FEMENINA: EL CUERPO, LA VOZ Y LA
MUJER TRADUCIDAS EN LA POESÍA DE JUANA PEÑATE MONTEJO

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POESÍA CH'OL CON PERSPECTIVA FEMENINA: EL CUERPO, LA VOZ Y LA MUJER
TRADUCIDAS EN LA POESÍA DE JUANA PEÑATE MONTEJO

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Abstract

This research situates Juana Peñate Montejo's collection of poems, *Ipusik'al Matye'lum/Corazón de Selva/Heart of a Wild Land*, in the context of contemporary indigenous literature, which seeks to recover silenced narratives and promote indigenous languages. Peñate Montejo presents a feminine perspective and combines elements of oral tradition with modern poetics to reflect the evolution of Ch'ol culture and worldview. Her self-translations foster a hybrid and intercultural identity, challenging the traditional representation of indigenous voices as "the other" and positioning her as a creator with agency and authorship in her literary work as well as her Spanish versions. The thesis is structured in three chapters: the first one examines Peñate Montejo's use of oral tradition and Ch'ol worldview in her poetry; the second explores strategies to interpret the hybridity and interculturality present in her work; and the third one analyzes her self-translations as a decolonizing practice that redefines contemporary Ch'ol literature and enhances the visibility of indigenous narratives.

Summary

This study explores Juana Peñate Montejo's poetry collection *Ipusik'al Matye'lum/Corazón de Selva/Heart of a Wild Land*, focusing on the interplay of tradition, language, interculturality, and self-translation. Examines how bilingualism and liminal spaces shape her creative process, emphasizing the convergence of diverse cultural influences and poetic forms within her work. Peñate Montejo returns to the oral Ch'ol tradition passed down through generations and actively recreates them in written form. She writes in a contemporary alphabetized Ch'ol and engages in self-translation, a practice that enhances the potency of her self-determination poetic expressions and the worldview of the Ch'ol around the themes of the natural world, cultural identity, women's role and the interplay between the natural and spiritual world.

This study situates Peñate Montejo's efforts within contemporary indigenous literature, which aims to promote indigenous languages and reclaim silenced narratives. Highlighting how her work embodies the richness of Ch'ol poetics with a feminine perspective, fostering the recovery and recreation of Ch'ol poetic expressions that reflect the oral tradition, the resistant but emerging culture, and their strong beliefs and cosmovision. These elements, combined with the intricacies of her self-translations, reflect intercultural dynamics and dual identities in her poetry, challenging the traditional portrayal of indigenous voices as merely "the other." Instead, she is a creator and authority within her literary landscape.

We will first set out a foreground analyzing the status of contemporary indigenous poetry and the various perspectives and concepts developed as strategy to read this literature and overcome cultural misconceptions, that many times result from the lack of knowledge about its hybridity, bilingualism, and inspirations. The first chapter will take us through Peñate Montejo's

poems that take inspiration on Ch'ol tradition and cosmovision and denote terms and structures from Ch'ol ritual speech. The second chapter will analyze the intersections and/or divergences of worlds and worldviews around the themes of identity, self-determination and feminine perspective. And in chapter three, we will discuss her self-translations as “her arena” to “reclaim” authorship and redefine Ch’ol contemporary literature.

The poems selected articulate complex identities that navigate language, culture, and the duality of everyday life. Through decolonizing practices such as rewriting in Ch'ol, self-translation of her work, and self-determination, she contributes to an aesthetic epistemic, political, and linguistic project that enhances the visibility of indigenous narratives. By transcending the dominant monolingual Spanish paradigm prevalent in Chiapas and in many other communities of indigenous Mexico, her work underscores the significance of bilingualism and the heterogeneity of poetic forms, contributing to rich indigenous expression.

Framework

The most recent studies about the Mayan literary canon have demonstrated how the destruction of thousands of ancient books has increased the “big gap” between our worlds due to the loss of knowledge. This has caused the separation and exclusion of indigenous communities from not only literary realms but also epistemic realms in the present and in the millennial past (Del Valle 12).

Within the domain of indigenous literature, one confronts a never-ending period of deliberation concerning the criteria and rationale for classifying literary works as indigenous. Over time, an escalating number of indigenous artists have engaged in prolific literary endeavors driven by a diverse array of objectives, providing a voice to historically marginalized communities. Poets like Juana Peñate Montejo have seized the opportunity to make substantive contributions to preserving indigenous literature, with a particular emphasis on safeguarding and giving voice to indigenous communities, women, and languages.

These literary creations play a crucial role in preserving native languages. They act as text models for current and future creative works, and, in doing so, they also contribute to a better understanding of their indigenous communities' worldviews and global perspectives throughout different periods—past, present, and future. Through their creative efforts, the authors recreate the voices, possibly even echoes, of ancestral figures like mothers, teachers, and healers, while integrating the voices of indigenous women and individuals who may have been silenced in most societal atmospheres.

Therefore, when analyzing these works, it is necessary to recognize that the creators' involvement and input is marked by adventurous, disruptive, and innovative qualities that align

with individual and community realities. Zumthor suggests that contemporary indigenous literature often employs oral poetry performance as a means of diffusion. In many cases, the writers themselves perform their works, becoming integral interpreters of their cultures and cosmovision. This performance creates a dialogue that extends beyond the moment of delivery, engaging with the community both before and after the event. Reckoning that indigenous literature combines elements of oral-medieval poetry with the dynamics of mediated poetry found within the written culture. This literature appeals to both the literate and the non-literate audiences, resonating with those attuned to native languages and those involved in writing and translation (Lepe Lira 9-32).

Recognizing and accepting these associations, both on an individual and institutional level is crucial for those involved in disseminating and promoting literature and culture. By doing so, we magnify and uphold Mexico's multicultural array of art inspiration of these voices and communities, fostering an intercultural environment where diverse individuals coexist and thrive.

Achieving multicultural coexistence requires us to delve into the teachings and worldviews of our ancestors, extracting valuable insights that contribute to a better understanding of our identity and responsibilities in the contemporary era. Our duty extends beyond our mere existence and progress; it encompasses a commitment to evolve and transcend for the collective betterment of this world. It becomes vital to recover and return to these teachings loaded with history, knowledge, and wisdom, and some dare to say that these are also charged with “predictions.”

As discussed, indigenous literature frequently takes inspiration on oral tradition; According to Alejos, “oral tradition” encompasses the body of knowledge that each society generates, preserves, and shares verbally and collectively as part of its social and cultural survival. In this context, oral tradition is a fundamental aspect of culture. It serves as an institution as ancient as language itself, responsible for the oral transmission of ideas, knowledge, perceptions, and values across generations. For millions of years, the collective memory of people worldwide has been entrusted to this tradition, relying on its ability to reproduce cultural content (Alejos García 142).

In 1881, Paul Sebillot introduced the term “oral literature” to surround several cultural expressions, including stories, songs, jokes, and everyday speech. In regard to oral poetry, Walter Ong (2002) defines it as an event rather than a text (Lepe Lira 9-32); Paul Zumthor, in *Introducción a la poesía oral* (1991), highlights its unique characteristics, which, he suggests, do not need to conform to those of written poetry. He emphasizes performance as a complex action in which a poetic message is simultaneously conveyed and perceived in the present moment. The speaker, the recipient(s), and the circumstances (whether the text, on the other hand, with the help of linguistic means, represent them or not) are directly indisputably confronted. He also argues that performance intertwines two axes of social communication: the connection between the speaker and the author and the interplay between situation and tradition (Lada Ferreras). He analyzes the poetic performance by identifying stages of production, transmission, reception, conservation, and repetition. The first two stages relate to oral transmission, while the latter processes involve oral or cultural conservation and repetition (Lepe Lira 9-32).

These contributions are essential for analyzing Peñate Montejo’s poetry. We will begin by exploring her texts and observing their resemblance to Ch’ol oral traditions, followed by

examining the interplay of meanings around the theme of creation, with the aid of the English versions. Afterward, we will identify the function and intention of some Ch'ol oral elements she employs in her poems, and finally address how these elements are presented in her self-translated Spanish version.

Unfortunately, most of the cultural production of primarily oral societies have been described as exotic, emphasizing them as “foreign” and their difficulty in accessing the “Ciudad letrada.” Without an analysis of the impositions by the world system (Wallerstein, 2004) on colonized people and their language, it is difficult to understand their “limited” access to spheres of self-government that would enable them linguistics favorable to the permanence of their languages and cultures (Alejos García 141-164). In his article *Indigenous Philosophies*, Miguel van der Velden shares that to regard them as nothing, but amusing myths and stories is no more than a form of cultural colonialism. Where more understanding can be gained if a variety of perspectives are considered, therefore, he proposes that indigenous philosophies do not need to be put on a pedestal above Western and Eastern philosophies, but rather, that they should be accepted alongside Western and Eastern philosophies for the enrichment of philosophical thinking worldwide (van der Velden).

Bouvier et al. also points out a surprising paradox for contemporary civilization: the enormous development of writing and oral transmission, thanks to modern technology such as radio, television, and the telephone. Zumthor, for his part, maintains that mass media have come to restore the authority of their voice (Alejos García). This is also true for Poet Juana Peñate Montejo, who, as a radio producer, creates spaces to share indigenous work as well as her poetry.

The significance of cultural transmission is immeasurable, and despite this obvious importance, an “evolutionist” thought has prevailed concerning oral traditions, even in academic circles, tending to conceive them as anachronistic, retrograde, rural antiquities; as opposed to the “modern,” scientific and civilized, therefore it should only be of interest to antiquarians, folklorists, and anthropologists interested in “primitive” cultures and the remnants of past eras. (Alejos García) This reminds us of similar thoughts from a century ago in his work, *Facundo. Civilización y Barbarie*, Sarmiento writes, from a Chilean prison and in a very combative manner, maintaining that “the civilized world is opposed to barbarie in the pampas, but both worlds are intertwined and destined to a conflict without resolution.” (Sarmiento, *Facundo. Civilización y Barbarie*)

All of these perspectives and ideologies have polarized, to some degree, the rapidly emerging movements of contemporary indigenous literature. This issue discloses the need to develop new ones, and new forms to explore while considering the rich indigenous world. A world that encompasses ancient knowledge that has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. Despite the emergence of pragmatic ideas, theories, and changes, these communities have recently found spaces to “penetrate” with their literary works. While some of these perspectives may have shaped the knowledge for better or worse, these contemporary writers are also generating spaces to pause and understand the depth and complexity of indigenous narratives.

The analysis and study of these works require the participation of a multidisciplinary set of concepts and perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the messages and worldviews that shape their realities. Therefore, as previously mentioned, it becomes necessary to learn and understand the oral devices present in their writing, the origins and functions of the oral

narratives, and the beliefs and values embedded in their verses. Today, we are witnessing the emergence of new writers who have either learned or taught themselves to represent these elements of their traditions in written form, ultimately contributing to the collective memory.

Poet Juana Peñate's poetry takes inspiration from the forms of Ch'ol oral traditions. Chapter I will take us through her poems to understand the cosmovision behind the oral traditions of the Ch'ol. We will observe poems that resemble characteristics of oral rituals or ceremonies. Even though it is not mentioned nor described as “the event” of the ritual, the readers can recognize it through her rhetoric and self-translation structures.

To help us understand such art, the categorization of literary tendencies proposed by Luz Lepe Lira will guide Peñate Montejo's poetry analysis. Lepe Lira proposes three literary tendencies for indigenous literature: the first one being “recovery of the memory,” the second one being “recreation of tradition,” and the third one being “hybrid.” (Lepe Lira) She suggests these tendencies as strategies to read and identify the concurrent elements. And in her essay *Lluvia y Viento, puentes de sonido. Literatura indígena y crítica literaria* (2010), Lepe Lira explains the three tendencies:

The first tendency, “recovery of the memory,” entails documenting stories, myths, and rituals and transcribing them without a particular stylistic intention. More than the recording of testimonies, this literary approach delves into the sounds of the language. For instance, in Humberto Ak'abal's poetry (Maya Quiche-Guatemala), he utilizes onomatopoeic expressions, uses ideophones of the Mayan language, recovers the names of birds or the sounds they produce in such a way that, at times, becomes untranslatable. In her opinion, including untranslated words not only provokes a nuanced exchange between the two languages but also constitutes a

deliberate ideological and strategic positioning to either reveal or hide certain elements, depending on the choices made regarding the transmission of meaning between the two languages. The selection of this discourse creates a layered understanding that reflects the complexities of bilingual communication. Another poet, Natalia Toledo, speaker of Zapoteco del Istmo in Mexico, revised vocabulary from Fray Juan de Córdova (1578) to reclaim words that may have become obsolete and to discover expressions like the onomatopoeic of pain as it moves through the body (Lepe Lira).

According to the tendency “recreation of tradition,” indigenous literature originates from oral tradition but does not aim to preserve this tradition; instead, it seeks to recreate it by incorporating new elements, exploring acculturation, and expressing a unique perspective. These actions may challenge traditional views within the community, especially regarding themes on women’s roles and values, when writers can rethink these from a more equitable standpoint. Another subversive characteristic is the poet’s evident reflections of literary and poetic style parallel to the Western world, aiming to “penetrate” the universal while establishing local and indigenous values.

Indigenous writers reinterpret myths and stories from their culture, fusing traditional elements with innovative approaches. In this realm, Christopher Teuton identifies two methods: one of suppression, where the characters move to the city, and another of return, which seeks to reconnect with cultural roots. Poets such as Odi Gonzales and Mikeas Sanchez portray current indigenous life, addressing themes of migration and daily struggles. In the works of Roxana Miranda Rupailaf (Chile) and Liliana Ancalao (Argentina), there is a clear reference to traditions familiar to their communities. Both, Mapuche, writers creatively reinterpret popular tales through poetry. Roxana Miranda also gives an erotic twist to the myth of Shumpall, the fish man who

impregnates women on the beach, focusing on the Mapuche woman's role in the seduction. Meanwhile, Liliana Ancalao reimagines the Caleuche, a mythical boat for the marginalized, turning its imagery into seeds, like peas with the vocation of a star (Lepe Lira).

Hybrid indigenous literature is being produced by a new generation of indigenous writers. It does not depict life in communities or ancestral traditions. Instead, it emphasizes the documentation of the new identities and the evolution of language and aesthetics of indigenous immigrants in big cities, or the new territories occupied by other marginalized inhabitants.

Another notable aspect of Peñate Montejo's poetry is her distinctive female and corporal perspective. This is evident in her choice of the poetic subjects and titles for many of her poems. Among them are: "X-ixik," which means woman, "Chuchu" (grandmother), "Madre Selva" and "Curandera" all of which use feminine nouns rather than masculine ones. The consistent use of feminine nouns and adjectives throughout her poetry reflects her intention to emphasize the feminine aspect. She also includes a corporal perspective by naming body parts in mimesis of the body of nature and the physical sensations and movements evoked by it.

This implies a long process of reflection and analysis, starting by questioning if this is not due, totally or partially, to the fact that the fashions of our Western and hegemonic feminisms, which prioritize parameters such as sexuality, pleasure, and free sexual choice, have colonized them, and distanced them from their own indigenous conceptions and symbolisms on the body closely related to the Mayan worldview of affection; to solidarity and collective sustainability, as well as to the fertility of the earth; the strength of the Universe and the cohesive character of motherhood that builds intergenerational ties with the living and the dead. It is not about mystifying or essentializing Mayan cultures. On the contrary, is about finding their own gender

subordinations, hidden by the so-called “Mayan spirituality” and redefining their contents with a liberating and revolutionary vision (Nelson).

Despite these impressions, we cannot forget that throughout history, Mayan women have faced oppression not only from the political system but also from the entrenched machismo within Mayan culture. Nevertheless, they continue to strive for a better present and future (Estrada 244). Authors like Rossana Estrada are putting together anthologies featuring important voices like those of Maya Cu, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín, Adela Delgado Pop, Rosa Chávez, etc, who she refers to as “women of corn and moon.” The work of these poets is rooted in the symbolic framework of the Mayan worldview, highlighting women’s contributions and their role in shaping the identity of indigenous women as social subjects. Estrada describes these women as “courageous, wise, and beautiful,” honoring their ancestors and expressing pride in themselves while envisioning a future for the next generation (Meza Márquez and Toledo 36).

With this, we cannot avoid dwelling on the term liberal feminism, which is rooted in the individualistic notions of freedom and justice prevalent in Western culture. As Celia Amoros points out, this perspective is often at odds with collective rights and intercultural concepts, stemming from an individualism essential for self-determination (Amoros).

The concept of self-determination was first introduced by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan as a psychological theory centered on understanding individuals’ intrinsic motivations and fundamental psychological needs. The concept highlights three core needs: autonomy (the capacity to make independent choices), competence (the sense of effectiveness in one’s actions), and relatedness (the feeling of connection with others). Although first applied to

individual behavior and motivation, this framework has since expanded to other areas to address social, political, and cultural issues (O'hara).

The self-determination of the poetic voice in Peñate Montejo's poetry as a body, as a woman, and as "the alphabet" is perceived by exploring the poet's oral and literary forms and the strategies used to integrate and assert their cultural autonomy, identity, and political agency.

This raises the question: can we truly build gender justice based on indigenous principles? Is concerning that most feminist approaches, even unintentionally, might contribute to the deculturation and ethnocide inherent in the capitalist system, undermining the calls for respect for indigenous collective rights (Amoros). The indigenous movement seeks to reclaim, to strengthen its identity, as well as to gain respect for its religious structures and spirituality through processes of decolonization.

The decolonial theory examines the colonial heritage as a key component of the modern capitalist world system, which Aníbal Quijano termed "the world pattern of capitalist power." Both decolonial and post-colonial perspectives critique the colonial domination imposed by empires and the discourse that justifies it, although they arise from different historical contexts. For example, in the Spanish colony of Abya Yala, a significant mestizaje emerged in the pursuit of emancipation, which was only partially successful, leading to a shift from Spanish and Portuguese rule to North American hegemony. Through this prolonged suffering, marginalized groups such as Black people, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and indigenous populations were rendered as invisible (Rodriguez Reyes 9-19).

Some countries are already taking decolonial measures; for example, Guatemala, with a large population of Maya descendants and native speakers of many variants has taken the lead in

acknowledging many of these works as part of the Guatemalan literary canons (Meza Márquez and Toledo 15).

One last aspect, besides the characteristic of recreation of tradition and self-determination of Ch'ol women's identity in Peñate Montejo's poetry, is the translation process. This is one of the most critical issues in anthropology and various humanities fields (Becker 1995; Rubel and Rosman 2003). From the beginning, it raises questions about the feasibility of translation between vastly different languages and cultures, which anthropologists often encounter. What happens to words and discourse when they are removed from their original social context and placed into another language, far removed from the speakers who once gave them meaning? When anthropologists document these experiences, they face the challenge of conveying these distant worlds in "plain English" or academic jargon, attempting to capture field interactions for audiences who may not share the same cultural or linguistic background as the original speakers. Consequently, one is left to ponder how much is lost in translation once the anthropologist moves away from the original language and the context of shared experiences (O'Neil 217).

Even as translation comes to a close, one wonders whether this attention to 'original words' fully resolves any underlying questions about translation. "What about the cultural background or the context of meaning, none of which can be completely addressed in this process? (O'Neil 219)." In his classic statement on linguistic relativity, first addressed to the Linguistic Society of America in 1928, Sapir said:

"The understanding of a poem, for instance, involves not merely an understanding of the single words in their average significance, but a full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words, or as it is suggested by their

overtones. Even comparatively simple acts of perception are very much more at the mercy of the social patterns called words than we might suppose” (O’Neil 219).

The so-called lyrical poetry is the work and fruit of solitude and accumulation. It is still so today but in very isolated cases. In most cases, the poet marches to the rhythm of the new times. Poetry then becomes acoustic and visual. Words splatter in all directions, like a grenade explosion; there is no real meaning but a verbal earthquake with many epicenters (Montale, Unicah 1992).

As Sapir noted, when it comes to understanding a fairly short text, such as a poem, the outside observer must consider the “whole social world” that it reflects (and refracts), including its many and perhaps endless meanings for the various participants in the event: the author, the performer, and the immediate audience. Alongside the meanings for the participants in the event, one might also consider the underlying cultural expectations they all carry with them, even if the performers violate some of those expectations (O’Neil 220). Hymes suggested:

“Still, translation may be the reader’s only access to the original lines and relationships; if so, adaptation to the target language may conceal the otherness of the text and some of its interest. There is no single answer to the question of how much to adapt and how much to preserve, but some degree of teaching is often necessary. One must often ask the reader to learn” (Hymes 2003, 40).

For example some translation exercises by mediators like in “La traducción como instrumento y estética en la literatura hispanoamericana del siglo XVI” (2004), Roberto Viereck examines two colonial works: Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s *Comentarios reales* (1609) and Guaman Poma de Ayala’s *Nueva Crónica y buen gobierno* (1615). He argues that in Garcilaso’s

work, translation serves as a synthesis, acting as a tool to reconcile the dominant language with the subaltern one (Lepe Lira 30).

In contrast, Poma de Ayala uses translation as a communication strategy aimed at mitigating the effect of the conquest by distinguishing Quechua from Spanish, thus restoring the original context. Viereck contends that both chroniclers are re translators, and their texts reflect a mestizo identity by embodying the complexities of translation; Viereck also adds that if *mesticidad* - the condition of being mestizo - is based on the lived experience of conflict and synthesis, where ethnic components and their symbolic derivatives are valued in an unequal matrix of power, then the translation is presented as a form of resolution. In the case of Peñate Montejo, we can presume her self-translation is a political act in which she is “reclaiming” the voice that was silenced for much time to build her “new” identity. In the early 1980s, Maya and Zoque members founded informal literary groups predicated on identity and cultural expressions strongly influenced by indigenous narrativization of indigenous people (Chacón).

Ongoing research into the poetics of translation continues to illuminate the complexities of meaning and ethnic identity in multilingual contexts (Henitiuk et Mahieu). Now when referring to self-translations, we encounter that it is a very new area of study in Translation studies; However, from a historical perspective, self-translation can be traced back to the coexistence of languages and cultures present in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance (Santoyo 2005). More officially, in 1976, Anton Popovic provided an early definition of self-translation, describing it as the process where an author translates their own original work into another language. Although this clear and straightforward definition has been helpful theoretically, further exploration of self-translation has revealed that the practice is more intricate than his initial description suggests.

In 1999 Grady Miller commented: “Historically, few authors have dared to translate their own works.” In the 2000s Helena Tanqueiro (2000: 50) informs the reader: “while it is true that throughout history there have been many writers who wrote in more than one language, such as Paul Celan, Derek Walcott, Samuel Beckett, Primo Levi, Jorge Semprún, Antonio Tabucchi, it is nevertheless interesting to see that only a few, very few indeed, actually translated their own work, even though all of these, and other important writers such as Hölderlin, Ezra Pound, Valéry, and so on, devoted much of their lives to translation...”

These poetic works navigate two or more sociocultural universes, forming a literary system marked by specific appropriations of spoken language within a written discourse. They engage with the issues of bilingualism or multilingualism and multiculturalism, particularly addressing the challenges of diglossia or heteroglossia. Raisin needs to explore the interrelation and convergence of various literary expressions and signifiers from different languages, dialects, and registers (Percia).

Just like Peñate Montejo, who presents her poetry in bilingual versions, self-translating her original Ch’ol work into Spanish. Drawing inspiration from Ch’ol oral tradition, she strives to preserve ancestral forms and her worldview as a bilingual woman navigating intercultural spaces. Also, the poetic self constructs its subjects through a spiral narrative, moving back and forth between the past and the present in a temporal landscape shaped by words. This process allows her to embody the identity of a Ch’ol woman, grounded in both her physical existence and a sense of eternity.

Writers are engaging in dialogues with their ancestry and identity, highlighting their “new ways” of making their cultures visible and revaluing specific hermeneutical enclaves.

Therefore, it is crucial to closely examine these interactions and linguistic exchanges revealed through the translation efforts of these writers; this exploration is vital for understanding the need to situate the forms of an epistemic alterity. The poetic or cultural text is viewed as a symbolic space for these tensions, similar to territories, borders, and contact zones. Here, the conflicts inherent in various cultural projects and their metaphors and imaginations are articulated (Percia).

Brief history of the indigenous Chiapas and their initiation in literature

Discrimination against “other” languages in Mexico has deep historical roots, and it preceded Spanish colonization. In the 15th century, central Mexican groups labeled languages from distant regions as “Chichimecas,” a derogatory association with weakness and barbarism, reflecting a hierarchical perspective of the cultural superiority held by the Aztecs (Flores Badillo, 64). This historical context illustrates ongoing ethnic conflicts among indigenous groups, which have persisted throughout Mexican history.

Upon the arrival of Spanish colonizers, indigenous peoples faced further marginalization; the majority of the Mayan codices were destroyed, and because of their absence and the absence of an occidental type of alphabet, they judged them as barbaric; contributing to a dehumanizing narrative that portrayed indigenous culture as “unintelligent” (Garza Cuarón). Then, throughout the 19th century, interest in deciphering the remaining ancient codices grew, culminating in significant breakthroughs by the mid-20th century.

Despite these developments, the socio-economic realities for indigenous communities remained dreadful. Political neglect, economic instability, and abuse of power resulted in entrenched social inequalities. The 1994 signing of NAFTA triggered the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) uprising due to the constant struggles for autonomy and rights amid globalization pressures. By the end of the 20th century, nearly 26% of Mexico’s population was illiterate, with many indigenous groups advocating for better access to education and healthcare while striving to maintain their cultural autonomy. (Ayala Reyes).

Bilingual education programs were introduced to support language minority students but often exacerbated linguistic insecurities as the broader contexts of society continued to devalue

indigenous identities. As noted by Langebaek, educational narratives were typically framed through the perspectives of mestizos and criollos (Garza Cuarón). Additionally, as Leetoy points out, colonizers forced indigenous peoples to adopt new writing forms that conformed to Western standards, which shaped how they could represent themselves (Garza Cuarón).

In the same century, anthropologists took on the task of recuperating “ancestral” materials with “uncorrupted” culture, unfortunately by the time they started collecting them, very little was found but enough to realize that these civilizations had a well-constructed network of beliefs and practices as their foundation of the conception of the world. They developed a series of expressions and verbal creation forms to “register” their presence in the universe and their harmonic relationship with it. (Oviedo) Expressions that are thought to represent literary phenomena of the poetic, narrative, and dramatic genres. These forms of expression were also found in “unwritten” literature, called by some “oraliture.”

In the case of the Ch'ol “literature,” it originates in oral tradition, more like an oral “art of duty” to pass down prayer ceremonies, healing chants, offering rituals, cosmovision, identity, and language reinforcement. Even though many native groups did not have a written, graphic alphabet, they had the conviction to create new forms of expression in their languages to preserve and register their existence by passing down history, knowledge of nature, and their “cosmovisión”, and most importantly, to serve their community. indigenous groups are polytheists and set their faith in “permanent forces of nature” represented by the fire, the rain, the thunder, the moon, etc, and most religions of the dominant cultures are monotheist. Even though these cultures and their languages have been “invisibilized” and purposely left behind. These communities maintained many of their ancestral beliefs and practices for hundreds of generations

by integrating their traditions with occidental practices and by telling their stories and rituals to the younger generations orally.

The younger generations have struggled to treasure the expressions and essence of their cultures; due to the discrimination against the prevalence and even more against the spreading of these languages. Due to all these obstacles, the Ch'ol language is experiencing change. Most adult men are bilingual in Ch'ol and Spanish, or trilingual, the third language being a neighboring Mayan language like Tseltal or Tsolsil. Women over 60 are often monolingual in Ch'ol, while many young adult generations are bilingual in Ch'ol and Spanish (Rodriguez). Literacy levels vary; few men over 60 are literate in Spanish, and most women in this age group are not literate. Most adults aged 20 to 60 have some Spanish literacy, with a few, mainly bilingual schoolteachers, also literate in Ch'ol. Current children, especially in urban areas, are primarily educated in Spanish, leading to higher literacy rates in Spanish. Some attend classes at regional Casas de la Cultura to learn Ch'ol literacy, but this is uncommon. Ch'ol is generally seen as a transitional language in bilingual schools, expected to be phased out as education advances (Rodriguez).

Juana Peñate Montejo is bilingual in Spanish and Ch'ol; attended university to receive law training and later became a translator of law in Ch'ol. She is also a professor, poet, and Ch'ol culture promoter. Peñate Montejo and her poetry are serving as an intercultural bridge to reclaim and preserve Ch'ol language and traditions and to open the gate to the possibility of recreating a new form to convey the complexities of a dual/hybrid life to a broader audience with the help of her self-translations and her understanding of both cultures.

Chapter I

Corazón de Selva: From Oral tradition to Soy mujer

Dice Juana: “¿Quién soy?, ¿de dónde vengo?, soy una ladrona de cantos y oraciones, juego a robar el corazón infinito de la selva, el sonido del silencio es el eco que construye mi voz, es mi voz la herencia de esta tierra donde todo parece intacto”.

-Juana Peñate Montejo.

With these questions, Juana Peñate Montejo summarizes her book *Ipusik'al Matye'lum/Corazón de selva/Heart of a Wild Land*: who is she? where does she come from? And calls herself a “thief of chants and prayers” as she reflects on her Ch'ol heritage. This discovery fuels her desire to delve into the vastness of the jungle, embracing its rhythm and depth, and declares: “*I am a woman!*”

Juana Peñate is part of a new wave of writers recovering and reshaping indigenous literature. She has won the Premio de Literaturas Indígenas de América (PLIA), and in her collection of poems, she revisits language present in Ch'ol oral traditions such as ceremonies, rituals, and prayers; not only to preserve them in written form, but also to reconnect with her ancestry and her identity. Her work invites readers into the sounds of the jungle as the poetic voice navigates life, intricately piecing together her Ch'ol identity within her shaped reality.

Through the poetic voice, and based on Lepe Lira's framework, she “recovers” collective memory while embarking on an individual search to uncover the mysteries of the Ch'ol world. In this chapter, we will examine three poems that resemble oral rituals, highlighting her strategies

for conveying the orality and significance of these traditions. Among these strategies, her self-translations play a crucial role, enhancing the sounds and emotional depth and power of her words.

Her achievements are a monumental contribution to her community, showcasing her skill and dedication to poetry. Peñate Montejo is originally from Ejido Emiliano Zapata, Tumbalá, Chiapas; a community predominantly Ch'ol. The Ch'ol are a group composed of about 254,715 (INEGI) slash-and-burn agriculturalists who speak a western Mayan language and live in Southern Mexico, mainly in the state of Chiapas, in the towns of Sabanilla, Tila, Salto de Agua, Tumbalá, and Palenque. The modern Ch'ol communities have their origins in the colonial 'comunidades agrarias' founded by Fray Lorenzo de la Nada in the second half of the sixteenth century, later dismantled during the Agrarian Reform led by Benito Juárez in the nineteenth century (Rodríguez). Although church property, aside from places of worship, was to be seized without compensation, monasteries were dissolved, cemeteries were nationalized, civil marriage was established: and the confiscated church lands were intended to be distributed in small plots to the landless. However, "la Reforma" failed with its land policy for by the end of the period, the number of the wealth of large landholder increased while the condition of the landless impoverished and worsened. Sentencing these communities to be operated under a system of communal land ownership (Britannica).

As a result, the Ch'ol and many other indigenous groups lost their lands, which were sold to European and American companies. Some of them became wage laborers (*jornaleros*) on large plantations mainly owned by German and English coffee companies until 1936 when Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated these coffee land estates and converted them into *ejidos*. This communal agricultural land could not be sold or bought. In Ch'ol communities, where lineage is patrilineal,

each member has the right to an area of land, with *ejidal* authorities overseeing the management and distribution of these communal lands (Rodriguez). After all these years, Ch'ol society remains largely agricultural, with most Ch'ol Mayas growing maize, beans, and squash in their milpas (cornfields) and coffee.

The presence of the Ch'ol on earth traces back to before the colonial period. As we have briefly seen, they have faced various challenges throughout the centuries, including conflicts with other indigenous groups and forced displacements due to global capitalist projects, particularly related to the exportation of coffee and other export products. For many years, the Ch'ol primarily focused on growing parallelly corn and beans, which maintained the soil healthier; they believe that the earth must be kept healthy and it cannot be considered a commodity or form part of the private property system since it is the Mother Earth that gives life (Moreno Zaragoza).

The poem titled “Mi cuerpo tu primicia” in Spanish, “My body” in English, and “Acha’ añ bak’tya” in the original Ch’ol start with the poetic voice in first person praising the earth and expressing appreciation for its greatness in tones of rendition and affirmation: “Inmensa tierra/Inmense world.” This poem also falls within the category of Lepe Lira’s theoretical framework of “memory recovery”; since the poet uses ritual discourse and vocabulary (Josserand). Some elements that are part of this discourse are the presence of the term *ch’ujlel*, which is translated as *espíritu* in Spanish and soul in English:

Acha’añ kbäk’tyal

Kolem lum,

acha’añ kbäk’tyal

yäx-elañ che’ bajche’ ayopol

xuk'ul che' bajche' tsätsbä itye',
tsiltsilña kch'ujlel, mi ach'ämoñ.

(Peñate Montejo, 5).

Mi cuerpo tu primicia

Inmensa tierra
mi cuerpo tu primicia
verde como tus hojas
firme como el tronco del roble
tiembla mi espíritu, me penetras.

(Peñate Montejo, 5).

My body

Immense world,
my body is your creation—
deep as the color of your leaves,
steady, strong as its branches.
My soul, trembling, you take me in.

Translated from the Ch'ol to English by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Friedman

(Translating Ch'ol Poetry into English: An abecedarian Essay).

In Ch'ol communities, “verbal arts are respected, and the Ch'ol have a rich body of traditional folktales and sacred myths, as well as skillful joking and narration of ordinary events” (Whitaker and Warkentin 1965, Alejos García 1988). They cover several themes, including, the creation, the pursuit by underworld beings, transformations (where people change into animals and vice versa), and interactions with the “Owner of the cave/earth;” who occasionally takes the

form of a man named Don Juan. In Chol mythology, caves are considered the sacred place of the primary earth deity, known as the “Owner of the earth” among the Ch’ol, Tsotsil, and other Maya groups (Josserand and Hopkins 12).

The Ch’ol believe they are one with the earth, nature, and the surroundings, which they believe was created by the god of heaven, *Pancha’ñ*. Recognizing their responsibility and interconnectedness with nature to achieve “balance on earth.” Also, they believe that every individual, animal, plant, and even the earth, has a spirit, known as *ch’ujlel*, bestowed upon them at birth by the “Owner of the cave” (Moreno Zaragoza), the owner of all earthly goods who needs to be asked for permission to make use of his plants and animals. The core belief is that these “goods” must be reciprocated, and failing to do so will cause evil spirits to be released to harm the wrongdoer. People still make offerings in caves these days for success in agricultural endeavors and other activities (Cruz, Josserand, and Hopkins 1980).

According to Josserand, a person is composed of diverse elements: a solid, heavy part made of flesh and bones and lighter, divine elements that animate the body, collectively called psychic entities. The vital essence within a person is known as *ch’ujlel*, or “inner divine spirit” (divine because it’s been given by the ‘Owner of the cave’), which is a spirit living in the body and expressed through the flowing blood. Every living being possesses an inner *ch’ujlel*, a shared essence of divinity (Moreno Zaragoza).

From birth, rituals are conducted to honor creation and to receive or recover the spirit of the earth (*ch’ujlel*). These rituals may involve offerings, promises, prayers, healing, and sacred sites. Despite their historical hardship, the Ch’ol have managed to preserve their worldview and tradition of rituals, which are considered essential for maintaining balance. Each ceremony in the

ritual year provides an opportunity for ritual speech, as do the planning session before each event, formal meetings between candidates for cargos and the principal *mayordomos*, and various other contexts (Josserand).

The poem “Acha’añ kbäk’tyal/Mi cuerpo tu primicia/My body,” has the characteristic of opening Peñate Montejo’s collection, as well as elements of ceremonies that may take place at a “sacred cave” to pray and celebrate through rituals and offerings to the “owner of the cave.” (Díaz Peñate) The *ch’ujlel* is the spirit for which each individual is responsible for cultivating and keeping in harmony with the earth; however, there are also the “demonic” type of spirits that can be released from this cave if there is no reciprocation or a violation towards the earth has taken place, which could somatize into an illness (Moreno Zaragoza).

Therefore, in this first poem, the poetic voice is “recognizing” that it has been created. When comparing the three versions available (Ch’ol, Spanish, and English), we encounter a difference in meaning in the following verse: *acha’añ kbäk’tyal/mi cuerpo tu primicia/my body is your creation—*.

This verse conveys that this newly created body profoundly connects with the poetic object: the earth, its creator, its physicality, and vitality. The voice expresses a sense of intimacy and infiltration with the poetic subject-object as its spirit is awakened. Then in the mimesis of “the earth’s body”, she uses the simile “green as its leaves” (from the Spanish version).

The verse “Mi cuerpo tu primicia,” from the Spanish version, presents the theme of “the first fruit;” according to Little, no words or morphemes indicate any sign or resemblance to the word “primicia” (first fruit) in the original Ch’ol version. This leads us, again, to look deeper into Ch’ol practices and cosmovision to try and understand the decision made by the poet.

Continuing with the same verse, in the Spanish version, the poetic voice, even if it was not revealed, can be represented by the “primicia,” (first fruit) itself; revealing a tone of thankfulness and rendition for being created. But also, for being the first “created” fruit (of the world, the season, etc.). Therefore, this same “body” could be rendering itself as the offering, portraying Ch'ol cosmovision around the principle of reciprocity and their need to live in harmony with nature.

For the Ch'ol, offerings at rituals are not just an “act of love” towards the earth. It is essential, as well as the element of “the promise” made by the interlocutor, a kind of contract in which offerings and good behavior are promised in exchange for the divine provision. To keep the agricultural cycle healthy and in harmony with the community, the Ch'ol celebrate rituals that include diverse offerings depending on the motive. Some offerings include food or drinks made of corn, plants and flowers, candles, incense (called *pom* in Ch'ol), and personal objects (Díaz Peñate).

Furthermore, when reflecting on Ch'ol history, during the classic period (600-1200 A.C), there used to be human sacrifices to ask the gods for good harvests and prosperity for everyone (Josserand). Thus, this poem could be interpreted as an act of “self-sacrifice” (“My body your creation—” from the English version) to its creator. This perspective is mainly fed off the second verse of the Spanish version: “mi cuerpo tu primicia.” The body, just manifested, is viewed as the “first fruit” and the “offering” simultaneously. Even though this interpretation hinges on the Spanish meaning of “primicia,” it is more nuanced than the English phrase “My body is your creation.”

The imagery could also evoke the journey of planting corn: from being planted to harvested; after it is sown, it grows “as deep as colored tree leaves,” “as firm as an oak tree” (as

noted in the Spanish version). When the corn is finally ready to be harvested, the corn is opened (or penetrated as it's described in the Spanish version), signifying it is ready to be gathered or taken in (from the English version).

According to linguist Vázquez Álvarez, the term *ch'ol* is used to refer to the Mayan people and their language; however, it is polysemic, meaning it has multiple related meanings, including “the language,” “the people,” and some have reported that Ch'ol comes from *chol* which means ‘cornfield’ (la milpa), “however, this is generally agreed to be a folk etymology without basis in regular historical sound change: there is no evidence that would suggest that *ch* in *chol* would become *ch'* in the name for the language and people (D. Mora-Marín, personal communication, April 2, 2020 and N. Hopkins, personal communication, April 26, 2020) (Little 2020). This association between the people and the cornfield dates back to the now-extinct Choltis during the colonial period. Contemporary Ch'ol, noted by Cruz Perez, identifies as *milperos* (cornfield workers) (Vázquez Álvarez).

However, this poem not only takes inspiration from Ch'ol practices but also from its oral speeches and sounds. Even though it would be impossible to “translate” the same rhythm, other elements can help in the translation process. For example, Ch'ol morphemes that, if found at a particular position, are considered affect words, which “refer to actions, movements, or sounds” (Little). Therefore, the phrase *tsiltsilña kch'ujlel* portrays the “sound” of “something moving/shaking unsteadily” (Little). She translates this verse in Spanish as “tiembla mi espíritu” and in English is translated similarly as “My soul, tremblin” (Little and Friedman).

The phrase “My soul trembling” or “tiembla mi espíritu” can be understood as the poetic voice expressing fear or perhaps reacting to an impending action: “mi ach'ämoñ./me

penetras./you take me in.” When comparing the three versions, many significant differences in meaning are revealed, encouraging a deeper exploration beyond the literal words. In Spanish, “me penetras” carries a strong connotation that may be later interpreted as erotic, especially when considered alongside the previous reflection on the sound of “trembling” (of fear). This combination suggests a powerful or even violent intrusion from an external force into another’s being.

The original version in Ch’ol and the English versions convey a “less dramatic” action by saying, “you take me in,” the imagery of being taken by the “soul of the earth” who will provide protection or custody to the “new” body; a sense of being embraced or carried away but lacks the intensity of “you penetrate me” from the Spanish version. These differences reflect the complexities of translating emotions and cultural nuances between languages. However, when taking into consideration the framework proposed around the orality of this poetry, we could assume that the decision for “me penetras” (you penetrate me) in the Spanish version at the end of the last verse could have been due to the word’s potency in meaning and sound; injecting “the strength” of the event as if it was to be recited orally.

In terms of artistry and polyphony, translating from oral tradition requires precise knowledge of the structures and audibility of both languages. In this case, the poet serves as the main observer of the traditional oral aspects of Ch’ol, which she then “recreates” in written form in Ch’ol and Spanish. Translators of the English version allude to Peñate Montejo’s captivating audibility of her poems by noting that,

“the language’s soft m’s and ñ’s are punctuated by staccatos of k’, ch’, and ts’. It is impossible to replicate the sounds of Peñate’s poetry in English (or in Spanish), and yet

we thought it possible to convey in English the lush imagery; tensions of history and modernity, Mayan and Mexican; and near prayer-like feeling of many of her poems” (Little & Friedman).

In her Spanish version, the phrase “me penetras,” (you penetrate me) we could argue, infuses a striking and provocative reaction; that could lead the reader to question its literal implications. This version suggests a forceful physical action, almost as if the soul (*ch’ujlel*) was being forcibly injected into a body. In Ch’ol oral practices, “the entering” and “exiting” of the spirit (*ch’ujlel*) are integral to the cycle of life. However, if the spirit is out of alignment with the laws of the earth, it can be removed (Josserand and Hopkins). Other types of spirits, including malevolent ones (sometimes activated by brujas or brujos), can also enter a body and cause illness or even death (Josserand and Hopkins). Through this, we can get closer to understanding the “strength” and physicality of this event and comprehend her translation decisions a little better. However, this could not have been perceived at first read if we had not had the availability of the third translated version in English, which has opened another window to the depth of their terms, those that go beyond the mere words or the poem.

Dennis Tedlock shares from his work that when translating Zuni poetry into English, he meticulously created a sophisticated graphic system to capture subtle yet vital features of the original oral performances— such as pauses, crescendos, tonal variations, and different lengths in chanting—that are often overlooked in translation. A key idea for Tedlock has always been that the poetic elements, including silences and pauses, are best appreciated when read aloud, allowing them to be experienced as sound, even in translation (see Tedlock 1983, 124-55) (O’Neil).

To take one example, O’Neil considers his classic essay “Some North Pacific Coast Poems: A Study in Anthropological Philology” ([1965] 1981, 35–64), in which he gives multiple translations of the same poems, each one capturing some aspect of the original with the explicit understanding that something will inevitably be lost in English. After presenting the poems in the original languages to give some sense of the phonological character, he provides a brief literal translation to convey a sense of the basic narrative or storyline without attempting to capture the style. He proclaims that these are only the first steps, and the process is painstaking. After introducing the original poem and its storyline, he provides a series of literary translations that represent elements of style before moving on to commentaries in which he provides background on the grammar and vocabulary of the original language, along with a sketch of the relevant cultural assumptions that inform the poem. Layer after layer, Hymes gets closer to conveying a sense of the artistry of the original poem, but no single translation can capture every aspect of the initial performance. Thus, like most enduring questions—or unanswerable paradoxes—the underlying tensions are not easily resolved (O’Neil).

Another characteristic of Peñate Montejó’s poetry from oral tradition is the presence of aspects (elements) that mark language instead of time/tense markers to present the events (Vázquez Álvarez). Every society has its unique way of approaching time and space, which is not just symbolic or imaginary but also manifested in the culture. According to Torsten Hagerstrand (1975), time is “embedded” in space, specifically within the spatial arrangements of both living and inanimate matter. This embedded time can be found in the objects we examine, in the human body, and in the material, environment created by humans, all of which reflect a specific understanding of time and space. Just as the sky influences perceptions, so too does the world (Rodriguez).

Much research has been gathered that demonstrates that the Mayans engaged in complex astronomical observations, which developed a rich tradition over the centuries. This knowledge formed their calendar's foundation and was instrumental in positioning buildings and sites. This alignment aimed to create harmony between human order and the cosmos, reflecting their desire to establish an ideal order according to their worldview (Broda 1993).

Ch'ol speakers often refer to time by describing the order of events in both the ceremonial and agricultural calendars, by using language markers to refer to completed or punctual activities. For example, the bending of the corn plant must be completed before harvesting can start, and the celebration of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* needs to occur before the next festival, the *Señor de Tila*. Thus, the Ch'ol view “bending harvesting” and *Virgen de Guadalupe* celebration and Señor de Tila’s festival as a benchmark for the subsequent, usually ongoing activity (Rodriguez).

This way of framing sequential relationships also applies to shorter time frames; for instance, one cannot begin patting tortillas until the nixtamal mixture is ready. Consequently, Ch'ol speakers might say, “Once the nixtamal mixture is completed, I start to pat tortillas.” A similar narrative style has been noted in other Native American languages, such as Chinook, where sequences are presented in phrases like “Having become tired, then he sat down” (Hymes 1981, 102). This mode of expression highlights events as references that serve as benchmarks that also follow a logical order based on binary relationships rather than a linear progression.

Understanding aspects that mark Ch’ol language aids in the understanding of the poems inspired by rituals in Peñate Montejo’s poetry, predominantly because her verses are

significantly synthesized; for example, the following poem isn't a ritual "per se" but is the description of the creation of a girl:

Tu creación

En tu creación niña, se tiñó de blanco el horizonte,
Mi corazón solitario fue tu bienvenida,
entre dolor y anestesia
brotaron lágrimas en mis ojos ausentes,
me sentí extraña al principio,
te contemplé, te acaricié y me gocé de ti,
te convidé con Ch'ututyaty,
Ch'ututyaty abrazó tu diminuto cuerpo,
Ch'ututyaty cobijó tu espíritu,
Ch'ututyaty desde entonces, en vigilia.

(Peñate Montejo, 65).

Your Birth

The sky painted itself white.
My heart welcomed you
between pain and numbness,
tears fell from my distant eyes.
I didn't recognize myself,
only saw you, touched you, enjoyed you.
I showed you to Ch'ujutyaty.
He held your small body.
Ch'ujutyaty blessed your spirit,
and since then, He has watched over you.
Ch'ujutyaty – sacred father

Translated from the Ch'ol by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Friedman.

(The Journal of Latina Critical Feminism, 9).

Based on previous information, this poem uses completed events as reference points for other activities that are not yet finished. For example, in the Spanish version, the verse “entre dolor y anestesia” (between pain and anesthesia), anesthesia could not be presented before pain. This verse appears in the English version as “between pain and numbness”), and still preserves the “sequential order” drawn from the traditional way of “timing” the events.

When talking about the concept of time, although the modern Ch'ol are descendants of the Classic Mayans, their understanding of ancient calendrical systems was lost during colonial times, and they no longer utilize any of the timekeeping methods used by the Classic Maya. Instead, they follow the Gregorian calendar for administrative purposes, alongside two additional calendars that influence the rhythm of the Ch'ol life throughout the year: the ceremonial calendar and the agricultural calendar. The ceremonial calendar features a significant collection of syncretic rituals and religious celebrations, such as the festival of *El Señor de Tila* (Hopkins and Josserand 2001) (Rodriguez). This festival is celebrated in Tila around Corpus Christi and centers on *El Señor de Tila*. Over two weeks, tens of thousands of pilgrims walk to Tila to worship at the Senor de Tila Sanctuary, situated at the town's highest point, as well as at a cave shrine on a nearby peak. The city transforms into a lively street fair, food stands with tin roofs pop up outside numerous houses, and informal taverns open in the living rooms of other homes (Rodriguez).

Another poem that showcases Ch'ol oral traditions is the poem “Yäxty'ulañbä iya'lel kajñibal/Manantial de mi existencia/Freshwater Spring”. Similarly to the poem “Mi cuerpo tu primicia/Mybody”, this poem uses vocabulary and themes drawn from Ch'ol cosmovision, also surrounding the concept of the *ch'ujlel*. First, the poem is named “Manantial de mi

existencia/Freshwater Spring,” and the *manantiales* or freshwater springs, are considered sacred by the Ch’ol (Díaz Peñate 19). These are a type of cave (with a whole that connects the surface with the center of the earth) from which the spirit of the planet (administered by the “Owner of the cave”) can exit or be taken back in (Díaz Peñate);

Yäxy’ulañbä iya’lel kajñibal

Tyi tsuwañbä ik’ajel, mi ityuk’ iñäch’tyälel,
Jiñäch k’uñtye’ mi ksub:
x’ixikoñäch,
woli ktyaj yäxy’ulañbä iya’lel kajñibal tyi pañumil.

(Peñate Montejo, 29).

Manantial de mi existencia

En la tarde invernal desgajo mi silencio.
Mi voz trémula y humilde afirma:
Soy Mujer
Descubriendo el manantial de mi existencia.

(Peñate Montejo, 29).

Freshwater spring

In the evening, I tear at silence
with a steady voice. I shout—
I am a woman!
Freshwater spring, source of my existence.

Translated by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Milholland Friedman

(Seven Poems by Juana Peñate Montejo at Exchanges Journal of Literary Translation)

In this poem, the poetic voice openly recognizes a voice that breaks into its silence with the virtue of making trembling sounds (from the Spanish version) but is also humble (from the Spanish version) and steady (from the English version). The poetic voice, self identifies with the gender accompanying the “spirit bestowed” upon her in the ritual at the sacred place of a fresh spring, affirming: “*I am a woman!*”

The suffix *äch* located after “x’ixikoñ” (I woman), is a semantic element that has the function of affirmation when added at the end of the word (Little & Friedman). While linguists have recognized this feature, they note that replicating its sound in English or Spanish would not make much sense (sound of yes!); instead, it is often translated in writing with an exclamation sign (!), and the word written in italics to convey its affirmation function (Little & Friedman).

Poet Juana Peñate Montejó uses these features as enhancers to shape the structure, rhythm, and function of her written work (these oral devices were recognized thanks to the availability of linguistic research by Dr. Carol Rose Little). By affirming, “*I am a woman!*” Peñate Montejó is entering the field of self-determination by “reclaiming” the Ch’ol word for woman *x-ixik*, with pride and excitement.

The Ch’ol language is primarily oral and spoken in Tumabalá, Tila, Sabanilla, and parts of Salto de Agua. Although the majority, if not all, of the inhabitants, speak the language, Ch’ol illiteracy is high. Discrimination and modernity projects have been the main contributors to the endangerment of this language.

Residents of these communities first learn Ch’ol when their parents or grandparents still speak it and stay monolingual until they start attending elementary school. Bilingual education in Mexico has not succeeded in all indigenous parts of Mexico (Ayala Reyes). Besides this, most

children from migrant families, when encountered with the “real world” in the cities, prefer to “suppress” their identities and languages. In this realm, Christopher Teuton identifies two approaches: one of suppression, where the characters move to the city, and another of return, which seeks to reconnect with cultural roots.

Juana Peñate Montejó grew up surrounded by the Ch’ol language and cosmovision. Her interest in writing started at a young age. Even though she first learned to write in Spanish, she soon became interested in learning to write Ch’ol. She then requested her creative writing mentor to help her create poems in Ch’ol. Juana Peñate Montejó has been very consistent with her writing, always learning and asking for advice or recommendations to improve her writing.

In an interview with Susana Bautista, Peñate Montejó commented that she had the opportunity to meet contemporary writers Jaime Sabines and Juan Bañuelos, both from Chiapas, and that Bañuelos once told her that he thought “she would be a great poet” because she was good at presenting one of his books (ITESO: Charla “Cantos hechos de palabras”). Peñate Montejó has earned her awards; she has won “Premio de Poesía Pat o ‘tan,” “cuento Y el Bolom dice,” and “Premio de Literaturas Indígenas de América, PLIA 2020” (Secretaría de Cultura).

Peñate Montejó had to leave her community to receive an education. Her access to schooling has evidently impacted her life not just as a poet or teacher but as an indigenous woman that today is representing Ch’ol literature with her poem books and self-translations in Spanish including *Mi nombre ya no es silencio* (Coneculta, 2002), *Ipusik’al Matye’lum/Heart of a Wild Land*, first published by Pluralia in 2013, and most recently, *Isoñil Ja’al (Dance of the Rain)*, which won the 2020 Premio de Literaturas Indígenas de América and will be published this year by the University of Guadalajara.

The intertwining of the self with the natural world in her poetry evokes both power and emotional resonance. In her poems, we can see the knowledge of the culture of their communities and peoples. Additionally, when we examine Peñate Montejo as a mediator, and translator, of the “oral messages” into written lyrical structures of the Ch’ol cosmovision in Spanish, we can note her mastery of literary creation in both; Ch’ol and Spanish. Her deep engagement in both cultures enriches her understanding of worldviews and emotionality. As Alejos proposed, it becomes necessary to keep reviewing Ch’ol oral forms and their specific functions and stylistic devices.

While this work has attempted to analyze and observe Peñate Montejo’s written poetry in Ch’ol, along with her Spanish and English versions, it is important to consider the complexities of self-translating and interpreting oral traditions. While access to linguistic and cultural research can provide valuable context, as we have noticed, direct contact and experience with the Ch’ol language will bring us closer to the sounds of daily traditions. Furthermore, these embodied community practices (like ritual ceremonies) could help us unlock the full depth of Peñate Montejo’s decolonizing strategies.

Peñate Montejo’s poetry stands at the intersection of multiple worlds: the Ch’ol worldview, the colonial and postcolonial experiences, and the complex realities of globalization. In the same interview with Susana Bautista, Peñate Montejo shared her stories from when the Acteal massacre occurred and about when she moved to San Cristóbal de las Casas to become a lawyer. Even though we perceive traces from “the other” culture, recognizing the role of Ch’ol oral traditions is key to understanding how the poet uses and exchanges languages. In many indigenous cultures, oral traditions are not simply a means of communication but serve to transmit spiritual, communal, and ancestral knowledge. Meaning that the “sounds” of the Ch’ol

language, when spoken in ritual contexts, carry layers of meaning and emotion that cannot always be literally translated into the written word alone.

These “written sounds”, which the poet translates into Spanish, demonstrate the poet’s process of self-translation. Peñate Montejo is likely attempting to evoke a sense of these oral traditions in a form that readers outside the Ch’ol-speaking community can access. However, as with any translation, it is inevitable not to get lost in the process. Written literature inherently lacks the cadence and emotional resonance of spoken words, especially from ritual ceremonies. This is why the ideal way to comprehend her work entirely would require a direct contact with the language and culture in its various scenarios where it is used, formal and informal contexts.

In this chapter, we identified cultural and oral traditions that served Peñate Montejo as inspiration for her poems. These elements are not few; however, we would need more time listening and interacting with the language of her poems to grasp the sounds and their purposes. I was enchanted by Peñate Montejo’s poetry from the moment I read the first page. Read the poem “Tu cuerpo mi primicia/My body” first, and I thought all the words (in the Spanish version) were literal translations of the words printed on the Ch’ol version; after re-reading the poems and learning about Ch’ol cosmovision and orality, I was able to identify these patterns and structures that appeared throughout the poem book. I found the poem “Manantial de mi existencia” (Freshwater Spring) to be very “disruptive,” it is so interesting what Peñate Montejo accomplished by adding the element *äch* to “*I am woman!*” resulting in an exclamation-affirmation-self-determination manifestation of a woman. Through this, Peñate Montejo emphasizes her feminine perspective as she explores women's autonomy, strength, and journey toward owning their voice in a world that often silences and marginalizes women.

Chapter II

Interculturality and hybridity in the poems *Madre Selva*, *Soy*, *Manantial de mi existencia*, and

Soy una mujer Ch'ol: Identity and Self-determination

Indigenous groups have faced discrimination and marginal conditions during colonial and post-colonial times; these and the syncretism that has taken place in their cultures have also influenced them and, to a certain point, modified their ways of living. This is one of the reasons that stirred the Mexican revolution. The Mexican Revolution, happening from 1910 to 1920, was a period of significant social and political upheaval. The outcome was the inclusion of indigenous languages and histories in the education system and land reforms, which aimed to take land from the wealthy and give it to the rural poor, many of whom were indigenous. This was an important move to tackle the economic inequities that had been corroding these communities for ages. In this context of the Revolution, a new vision for the nation was being developed and intensified during the 1930s and 1940s. Public figures like José Vasconcelos and artists like Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo played a role in this movement.

Vasconcelos's famous essay "La Raza Cósmica" explored the idea of a new, mixed-race emerging in Latin America, symbolizing unity and cultural synthesis. The essay aimed to promote a vision of a harmonious future where diverse backgrounds would marry into each other, resulting in one main mixed race (Vasconcelos). Diego Rivera and Alfaro Siqueiro used murals to depict the contributions of various races and ethnicities, promoting a unified Mexican identity. Another attempt to unify the nation was the *Indigenismo* movement; *Indigenismo* is a term that refers to a broad grouping of discourses—in politics, the social sciences, literature, and the arts—concerned with the status of 'the Indian' in Latin American societies" (Tarica).

20th-century modern *indigenismo* has three key aspects: it prioritizes the “indian problem” as the most important for national modernization and revolutionary efforts; it aims to be integrated into state policy; and concentrates its efforts on the study and valorization of the indigenous cultures (Tarica).

Indigenismo flourished in literature and the performing and visual arts. In most of these *indigenistas* work, the “indigenous” was presented as the object of the plot; the “mediator” could only interpret or synthesize the cultural and ethnic part of it, for many did not fully understand their “cosmovision” nor the language; and those that learned the language would make their best attempt to transmit the “superficial” idea of what the native recite during their daily life practices and in special rituals.

Parallely, Canclini introduced the concept of *Hybrid Cultures* as a tool to analyze and comprehend modernity in Latin America. We first need to understand what culture is. Culture encompasses a specific group of people's beliefs, customs, values, and practices during a certain period. The items created by that culture reflect these values explicitly and subtly. (Cultural Contexts in Literature: Definition & Examples) Naomi Kipuri asserts that culture has been defined as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” She adds that culture is the aspect of our lives that connects us with certain groups while distinguishing us from most others. It encompasses the shared way of life, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that enable a group to coexist peacefully, while setting them apart from different communities. For Canclini, hybrid cultures are the middle states that “regard themselves as caught between traditions that have not yet gone and a modernity that has not yet arrived.” Situated at the intersection of transition and modernity, Latin America’s challenge lies in building a democratic culture and knowledge that

resists the persuasions of elite art and literature and the pressures of mass media and marketing.

(Rosaldo Renato et al. xi)

For indigenous communities, preserving and upholding tradition and cosmovision is a task in and of itself. According to Josserand and Hopkins, the Ch'ol have been one the most conservative, secluded, and traditional groups of the Maya group; however, today, this is endangered due to the expansion of modernization projects into the region, such as new roads and railroads; exemplifying the unavoidable intersectionality of these subjects. The Ch'ol would represent the middle state, which Canclini points out, manifesting a pronounced tension between keeping traditions and transmitting their cosmovision orally and “resisting but having to adapt” to colonization religious forms (imposed since colonization). Besides the internal tensions, the Ch'ol and many indigenous groups also face many other external tensions, such as being discriminated against for not “acculturating” to the “modern ways” and remaining “wild/uncivilized;” they have also been displaced from their territories due to “internal” conflicts (many of which were infiltrated by the government in place).

Mexican cultural politics has benefited from this intersectionality; consequently, they adopted *indigenista* politics within the framework of the modernization of the nation project and the search for a pre-Hispanic and national identity. The mestizos *letrados*, and *indigenistas* worked on discourses to try to integrate the ever-changing representations of the indigenous up until contemporary times, resulting in *mestizo* discursivity and hybrid contradictions of representation of the subaltern subject (Arias). In the words of Eric Hobsbawm: “If a group of practices, normally governed by openly accepted rules and of a symbolic or ritual nature, are “integrated” to indoctrinate certain values or standards of behavior through their repetition,

which automatically implies continuity with the past, wouldn't we be preserving an invented tradition?", (Hobsbawm 8).

The underlying structures and characteristics created by the *letrados* and *indigenistas* have fed stereotypes that have often created binary oppositions, such as main/other, national/regional, State/province, urban/rural, and oppressor/marginalized. However, autonomy movements in Chiapas, like the one led by the EZLN and others, have once more pushed back against hegemonic cultural and economic systems imposed by the Mexican state. These social movements have allowed the natives to reinstate their voice in politics and literature grounds to represent and write about themselves, (Flores Badillo 61).

Furthermore, as Arturo Arias notes, contemporary Maya literature reflects the evolving role played by literature in subaltern societies. Literature has gained significance within Maya communities as literacy and education have increased. Also, many writers are now gaining international acclaim, an indication of the emergence of a movement that showcases the knowledge, skill, and experiences of previously "invisibilized" individuals. These writers are not only writing in their native languages, self-translating, but also utilizing compelling rhetorical techniques to decolonize and redefine their identities within a "modern" context (Arias 144).

Therefore, works like Peñate Montejo's are not limited to replicating oral tales and rituals that they learned growing up and have been passed down orally to generations. What we are seeing them write today goes beyond the task of writing "recovery of the memory." These writers are engaged in a complex, dynamic process of self-expression; by first learning to write in the indigenous languages, which blends tradition with innovation; in Peñate Montejo's case,

she takes inspiration in oral traditions and combines it with “self-discovery” themes while also reflecting on the intercultural exchanges that shape their contemporary life.

Interculturality in this context is not simply about the peaceful coexistence of cultures but is deeply tied to struggles over land, resources, and self-determination. The hybridization of cultures in Chiapas includes negotiating between traditional indigenous ways of life and the pressures of the modern state and globalization. For example, the article "*Luchas ‘muy otras’: Zapatismo y autonomía en las comunidades indígenas de Chiapas*” looks at how some of these communities have created a hybrid form of governance that blends indigenous and modern democratic principles, aiming to establish an intercultural society (Estrada Álvarez).

Another example of “hybrid-intercultural” emerging voices is the poetry of Juana Peñate Montejo, whose work navigates the intersection of indigenous cosmovision, nature, and modernity. Her poetry is a rich fusion of oral tradition, indigenous cosmovision, and personal bicultural experiences of a Ch’ol woman. Therefore, we will observe that her poetic voice “dances” between two worlds, sometimes with anguish or pride and at others with resignation. Through this dance, the lyrical voice recognizes and assimilates who she is and where she comes from until she finally recognizes herself as “Soy una mujer Ch’ol” (I am a Ch’ol woman).

This chapter will take us on the “discovery” journey of the poetic self through the poems “Yäxty’ulañbä iya’lel kajñibal/Manantial de mi existencia,” “Kña’matye’lum/Madre Selva,” “Joñoñ/Soy,” “Awujts’il/Tu aroma,” and “Tsolts’ijboñ/Soy Alfabeto.” In these poems, the poetic voice dialogues with the lyrical subject in her search for identity, belonging, and voice. Peñate Montejo’s contemporary Ch’ol literature involves recovering indigenous forms, its “integration” with colonial ones, and its redefinition of “contemporary themes and structures.”

The journey begins with the poem “Manantial de mi existencia” (Freshwater Springs). This poem portrays oral tradition by employing the semantic *äch* right next to the word “X’ixikoñ, an affirmative marker that injects potency into the proclamation x’ixikoñäc/Soy Mujer/*I am a woman!* In this poem, the poetic self makes its first discovery at the threshold of the freshwater spring: it is a woman!

After the poetic self learns it is a woman, it embarks on its next move. The poetic subject migrates to the city:

Kña’matye’lum

Mach komik sajtyel ila tyi kolem tyejklum.

mach käyäyik chumtyäl che’ maxtyo tyejchbilik kcha’ añ ñaxambä

Its’ijbal jk’ay.

Majtyañ ak’eñoñ ili ak’lel ikäk’al lakpi’älob,

Jambeñoñ kwuty tyi yojlol kña’ matye’lum.

(Peñate Montejo, 10).

Madre Selva

No quiero perderme en la inmensidad de la metrópoli,

no desamparo mi habitar antes de iniciar la primera letra de mi canto.

Regálame esta noche la luz de la multitud,

y despiértame en la profundidad de la Madre Selva.

(Peñate Montejo, 10).

In this poem, Madre Selva, we can observe two identities of the poetic self. One manifests a longing and deep preference for the jungle (her sacred place/her community) and is

anguished about getting lost in “the metropolis.” The second identity accepts the city as a “gift” from Mother Earth. She pleads to *Madre Selva*: “Regálame esta noche la luz de la multitude” (gift me tonight the light of multitud).

Despite the physical distance of the poetic self from the jungle/sacred place, it is manifesting her commitment from afar to “living and caring for her community/sacred place,” as noted at the beginning of the second verse, “no desamparo mi habitar. . .” (I do not forsake my home). This commitment is strengthened in the subsequent line, where she expresses a desire to document her roots and preserve the beliefs and values of her origins: “antes de iniciar la primera letra de mi canto” (before I begin the first word of my chant).

The “second” identity appears through a rhetorical turn that starts by requesting Mother Jungle/earth/lum the gift of the multitude’s light: “Regálame esta noche la luz de la multitud.” If there was no preceding couplet, we could assume that the poetic voice also longs for the multitude as for the mother jungle/earth/lum. However, in this context, it could be interpreted that the “second identity” “is content” with the “gift of the city,” as long as she holds tight to her commitment to her “sacred place.”

From another angle, the verse “Gift me tonight the light of the multitude” could reflect irony, where the poetic self “conforms” to the “irremediable,” almost as if it was criticizing that there is no other option than to go out into the city to “survive” and achieve something for her community. Alternatively, the multitude might refer to a variety of stars, and she might be requesting Madre Selva (Mother Earth) to gift a multitude of stars to her so that she does not forget her “sacred place” and commitment to her.

The Ch'ol, after enduring several conflicts and displacements, have remained in complex and isolated territories in “the middle of the jungle,” where few pass through unless they have a specific purpose. However, with the onset of modernization projects in their communities, the Ch'ol are now constantly interacting with both languages and worldviews, which, for some, causes anguish of “getting lost” in the middle or preference for one identity over the other. And finally, it may cause others to “conform” and accept their “hybrid” lives.

The following poem exemplifies the previous reflection. After the poetic self recognizes its two identities, it navigates moments of “cultural shock” between both. In the poem “Soy,” we can almost “hear” two “different” voices; one filled with pride for being “from the jungle and everything that it represents,” and the other that shows surprise at discovering what makes her “different.” Peñate Montejo’s rhetoric shift in the fourth verse aids the reader in identifying this other “voice/thought/emotion:”

Joñoñ

Joñoñ ip'olbaloñ matye'lum,

ity'ojoleloñ matye'wits.

Joñoñ iyuts'atyl jiñi pa'

yik'oty ik'uñlel kña'lum.

Ili kty' añ lekojax tyi alol,

kty'añ kabäl ip'ätyälel,

kty'añ kabäl isujmlel

che' mi kcha'leñ ty'añ mi jk'äyiñ.

(Peñate Montejo, 54)

Soy

Soy la fertilidad de la selva,

la elegancia de la montaña.

Soy la belleza del río la inocencia de la madre tierra.

Mi lenguaje es extraño,

mi lenguaje es embrujo,

mi lenguaje es policromado

porque al hablar canto.

(Peñate Montejo, 55)

The Ch'ol know that their language and worldview differ significantly from those of the dominant society. While their culture and traditions remain rooted in a unique cosmovision, external pressures have also affected them. Some indigenous groups and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) have participated in various social movements to vindicate their rights to territory, political autonomy, education, and social inclusion. Despite their struggle for recognition and justice, they have realized that the “world” operates in a very different way compared to their cosmovision and communal practices, opting to continue “resisting” and “raising” their voices.

Their awareness has led them to comprehend that complete isolation is not a sustainable option in today's world. However, their commitment and value for their traditions and

cosmovision have made them see the need to grow strongly rooted in their values; and even more, when engaging with broader societal structures—so they do not lose their cultural identity. As they face increasing pressures from the capitalist world, they also recognize the need for education and integration into more significant political and economic systems.

In this context, movements provide a powerful demonstration of resistance and coexistence. For example, for the Zapatistas, one of the key principles they advocate for is a “pluri-national” framework; this framework envisions indigenous groups as “different” but complementary to the general national identity. In this proposal, indigenous groups would not be forced to assimilate or subordinate themselves to the dominant culture; instead, they would coexist with it on their own terms. Martí Puig notes that this vision challenges the conventional notion of a unified nation-state because, contrary to “the convention,” they support a pluralistic vision of a society where diverse identities can thrive (Martí-i-Puig).

These movements have mainly emphasized interculturality and autonomy, revealing the nuances of previous and current approaches. They seek a balance between “accepting” the necessary aspects of modernity and defending indigenous worldviews.

The Ch’ol, by participating in these movements through Peñate Montejo’s literature, confirm that they are not just passive recipients of external changes but active agents in shaping a future where their cultural autonomy is respected, while engaging with the global world (Blume).

It could seem the Ch’ol are striving to be “included,” and to “belong” to both worlds. However, the reality is more complex: previous indigenous narratives crafted by *mestizos* have deepened and worsened “the differences,” making it almost impossible to achieve this. Although

this “negative” vision created by the *mestizos* affects the Ch’ol; Peñate Montejo, for her part, has also defined the non-indigenous, as we will observe in the next poem:

Chuchu’

Tsa’ jk’aja koj tyi apusik’al kchuchu’,
jiñi **kaxlañ** ña’tyibal woli imiloñ, woli its’u’oñ.
Che’ jiñi tsa’ tyili ach’ujlel bajche’ lakmam:
Jatyety ipäk’ilety matye’el, icha’añety
ch’ixikña kch’ujlel tsa’ majli,
kbäk’tyal tsa’ sujtyi che’ bajche’ chajk.

(Peñate Montejo, 18)

Chuchu’

Me posé en tu corazón chuchu’,
mi pensamiento injertado me ahoga y me aprisiona.
Tu espíritu vino como rayo, se internó en mí:
Tú eres de la naturaleza y de ella serás
mi espíritu se agitó.
mi cuerpo fue chajk.

(Peñate Montejo, 18)

Chuchu’

Chuchu’, I rest in your heart.
Thoughts of the **kaxlañ** were strangling me, devouring me,
then your spirit came like thunder.

You are of the forest, you belong to it.

My soul shook,
my body became lightning.

Chuchu': grandmother

kaxlañ: non-indigenous

Translated from the Ch'ol by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Milholland Friedman.

(NDQ, Special selection on literature in translation).

The Ch'ol word *kaxlañ* means “non-indigenous” (from the English version). However, in the Spanish version, the poet’s decision to altogether avoid any inference of “non-indigenous” and protect herself under the verse: “the imposed thoughts that suffocate and imprison me” could be considered as a strategy to reconcile both cultures as used to do Inca Garcilaso in colonial times. The translator’s decision to leave the word *kaxlañ* as untranslatable in the English version highlights the difficult paradox of the poet, struggling to convey such a layered meaning in a single term, which is why they included the definition of the word at the bottom of the poem.

Her choice to not translate the term literally in her Spanish version and instead represent the word with an “expanded” explanation of what *kaxlañ* is, demonstrates her level of authority and self-determination. These thoughts may refer to modern globalized ideologies such as feminism or LGBTQ+ rights or to imposed religious beliefs. The poet’s ability to convey this sense of resistance without directly labeling people but instead framing it as a “struggle” against foreign ideologies speaks to her initiative in creating space for indigenous self-determination with respect. She positions herself and her people as the poem's subject, actively rejecting the suffocating influences of imposed “thoughts.”

We can agree that the previous poem reflects the poet's mastery in weaving together language, power, and cultural resistance. By choosing to frame these ideas as "thoughts" rather than people, she avoids the dangers of reinforcing a binary opposition between "us" and "them" while still proclaiming a statement about the intrusive nature of "foreign" ideologies. It also reflects both a critique of colonialism and a broader mediation on the imposition of foreign ideas on indigenous peoples.

And to land at our final discovery, we have arrived at the poem "Joñoñ xty'añoñbä x-ixik/Soy una mujer xty'añ (I am a Ch'ol woman)," this poem is not included in the poem book *Corazón de Selva* but it follows the theme of "self-determination"/self-proclamation;" a poem that serve as the epitome of interculturality and self-determination:

Joñoñ xty'añoñbä x-ixik

Joñoñ xty'añoñbä x-ixik,
tsa' kila pañumil tyi tsuwañbä matye'lum,
uts'atybä kolem lum,
mi ksujtyel che' bajche' ñu'p'oñi'bäl tyi pejtyelel yäxty'ulanbä oño'ty'añ.
Tyilemoñ tyi ityamlel lum
ya baki jiñi pa', iwuty ja,
ñäch'tyälel yik'oty ik'yoch'añbä
lichikña mi' mel jiñi x-ixikob,
tsäts mi' boñob majlel ibijlel bäk'eñ,
mukulbä icha'añ matye'el
yik'oty its'ojtyäklel tyejklum.

Ma'añik chuki mi icha'leñ:
tyi ñajtylel kmatye'lumlojoñ
woli kch'ämlojoñ tyilel soñ
cha'añ mi ktyijikñesañojoñ pañumil.

Soy una mujer ch'ol

Soy una mujer ch'ol,
nacida en la zona fría de la selva,
territorio de tan hermoso y amplio
se convierte cárcel con todos los tonos verdes de la historia.
Vengo de aquella lejanía
donde los ríos, manantiales,
silencios y oscuridades hacen que las mujeres sean tímidas,
firmes dibujando el camino del miedo,
los secretos de la montaña
y la encrucijada de la ciudad.
No pasa nada:
fuera de nuestras selvas
traemos música
para convidarle a la humanidad.

(“Xochitlájtoli: Juana Karen.” Círculo de Poesía)

Peñate Montejo's poem vividly illustrates the process of return, re-identification, acceptance, and reintegration of the poetic voice's identities, similarly proposed by Christopher

Tueton. Her poem can also be interpreted as a critique of “biopower,” where the “Ch’ol woman” from the jungle accepts her “isolation,” and the Ch’ol woman from the city also accepts her “struggle” to navigate the city by adorning everything that's occurring in the scene/landscape; in real life, this is characterized by the painful exclusion and a complex entry into urban landscapes shaped by conflicting ideologies.

Yet, the poem also suggests an awareness of the external world, as the poetic self reflects on the tension between her heritage and the modern world. She writes, "Fuera de nuestras selvas / traemos música / para convidarle a la humanidad"—"Outside our jungles, we bring music / to invite humanity." This juxtaposition of the jungle and the "outside world" speaks to the dual existence that many indigenous people experience: a simultaneous embrace of cultural heritage and a recognition of the need to engage with the wider world.

Peñate Montejo's poetry emerges from a space where these ideologies intersect and are subverted, often reflecting a duality within her identity. On one hand, she asserts and embraces her identity; on the other, she grapples with disorientation and alienation in a world that often fails to reflect her own experience. This dual perspective allows her to recognize her otherness while simultaneously navigating its effects, acting as both a force of resistance and a means of confronting and transcending these challenges.

This transformative awakening can be understood as a liberation from a bodily existence constrained by the patriarchal structures of Mexico, which are disillusioned with their own myths. Through this lens, Peñate Montejo's poetry is a powerful testament to the complexities of identity in a rapidly changing world.

This “new wave” of contemporary indigenous literature has arisen thanks to the considerable effort put into transcribing alphabets and writing systems for indigenous languages. Therefore, these literary works must be analyzed and systematized, without forgetting the degree of intersectionality and subjectivity involved in creating literary representations of their own cultures.

According to Maynez, some critics assert that the current trend in academic research and literary studies remains unchanged and that the usage of terms like “indigenous,” “indian,” or “original” is used to distinguish these works from those written in Spanish; suggesting that “indigenous writers continue to fight for self-determination and the preservation of their traditions and languages (Pilar Máñez, *Breve antología de cuentos indígenas*, UNAM, 2004:VIII). However, contemporary literature should be about fostering the formal development of writing and reading in these languages as forms of artistic expression.

Intercultural analysis like this one, where not only one perspective is taken into account but all the available should be the norm; through comparing, contrasting, and integrating meanings, worldviews, and other aspects of the cultures involved. New perspectives can emerge from this that set the foundation of the aesthetic depiction of the clashes and intersections. This is especially pertinent in today’s globalized and multicultural context, with issues of identity, otherness, and representation becoming increasingly significant. It also becomes crucial to parallelly analyze the writer's creation process and hybrid circumstances that add to the subjectivity of her work.

By observing the forms in which languages and sociocultural aspects intersect in the poetry of Juana Peñate Montejo, we can define her work as an intercultural bridge that adds

meaning to both “worlds.” Even though the poems in her collection evoke a type of “chronology,” beginning with the emergence of the poetic voice, we, as the readers, need to keep in mind that the concept of time for the Ch’ol is completely contrary to Western chronologies. Ch’ol temporality is usually marked by events. Therefore, after the emergence of “the body,”; the poetic voice then undergoes a process of “gender” recognition and shouts: “*I am a woman!*”

Later, when the poetic voice finds herself lost in the metropolis, a fascinating rhetorical shift occurs in the following verse: “Tonight (praying to Mother Earth), gift me the light of the multitude and wake me in the depths of the Mother Forest.” The poetic voice embraces her mobility and dual existence, while longing to be in the “jungle”—symbolizing her community. When she asks for the “multitude's light,” her duality becomes evident. At the same time, her preference for her roots and the indigenous landscape is unmistakable, she ultimately accepts that “there is no other way.” This acceptance could signify a refusal to live in conflict between these two realms.

This act reinforces her political intention to portray her experience as a dual subject experiencing life between two worlds. As Giovanna Rivero articulates, it is “an intimate and at the same time public space in which individual desires for meaning and existential transcendence intersect with the political duties imposed by the historical moment.” These tensions, which create painful dualities within the self, are at the core of the poetic subject in “Madre Selva.”

Another important perspective to analyze in Peñate Montejo’s poetry is the feminine one. Today, indigenous women, in their communal cosmovision, still believe they must preserve and pass down the knowledge of their ancestors to younger women and men to depict their surroundings and to convey emotions through literary or embroidered images. In these cultures,

imagery provides a crucial way to communicate more than just technical and artistic abilities. The graphics and colors, organized with precise mathematical arrangements, reflect their cultural, social, religious, economic, and political narratives. As such, the imagination embodies the social fabric of a community and expresses their worldview (Lubo Vacca, *Revisión de nociones ecocríticas*).

Peñate Montejo's poetry also touches on themes of female empowerment and self-determination. In “Manantial de mi existencia” (Freshwater Spring), the speaker reflects on her relationship with the voice and the gender “assigned,” both metaphors for the self. “Mi voz trémula y humilde afirma: / Soy Mujer” (“My trembling and humble voice affirms: / *I am a woman!*”). Here, the poet uses her “new” voice to assert her identity as both a woman and an indigenous person, linking this affirmation with the natural elements of water and land, which are sacred to the Ch'ol. The poem reclaims indigenous femininity, a declaration of strength and existence in the face of historical erasure.

As we noted earlier, in the poem Yäxyt'ulañbä iya'lel kajñibal/Manantial de mi existencia/Freshwater Spring, Peñate Montejo makes use of Ch'ol cosmovision and recovers the ritual that takes place in a sacred fresh spring. But we won't dwell on all the meanings and significance of the recovered tradition; instead, we will focus our attention on the poet's astonishing self-translation decision of the verse Jiñäch k'uñtye' mi ksub/Mi voz trémula y humilde afirma:/with a steady voice. I shout—

Today, poetry serves as a platform from which writers can launch their identities and critiques. Peñate Montejo's verses rely on Ch'ol oral traditions; however, her work also “reclaims” the Ch'ol woman identity as x-ixik by shouting, “*I am a woman!*”

Yäxty'ulañbä iya'lel kajñibal

Tyi tsuwañbä ik'ajel, mi ityuk' iñäch'tyälel,
Jiñäch k'uñtye' mi ksub:
x'ixikoñäch,
woli ktyaj yäxty'ulañbä iya'lel kajñibal tyi pañumil.

(Peñate Montejo, 29)

Manantial de mi existencia

En la tarde invernal desgajo mi silencio.
Mi voz trémula y humilde afirma:
Soy Mujer
Descubriendo el manantial de mi existencia.

(Peñate Montejo, 29)

Freshwater Spring

In the evening, I tear at silence
with a steady voice. I shout—
I am a woman!
Freshwater spring, source of my existence.

Translated from the Ch'ol by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Milholland Friedman

(Asymptote Journal; Seven Poems by Juana Penate Montejo)

The poet's stylistic and self-translation actions depict authorship and self-determination. She completely altered the meaning of “Jiñäch k'uñtye' mi ksub” for “Mi voz trémula y humilde afirma,” in the Spanish version,” which is translated into English as “with a steady voice. I shout—.” Meeting again at a crossroads of possibilities, this opposition in translation denotes self-determination by choosing to portray a “lessen” figure of the Ch'ol woman in Spanish, suggesting a more vulnerable, perhaps submissive, tone. Even though the English version reveals the original idea that the poet tried to portray in Ch'ol, it remains a mystery why she translated it

as “trembling and humble voice” in a poem where she is discovering her voice and at the same time “shouting” about her “gender discovery.” This poem denotes a “steady” voice; indeed, since it starts, it evokes a sense of “urgency” and demand in the first verse of the Spanish version: “En la tarde invernal, desgaja mi silencio” (in the afternoon of winter, rip my silence off me). Transmitting a “stronger” tone to the event of “voice recognition.” However, the fact that she diminished this virtue in the Spanish version could signify her determination to “smoothly” “redefine” women’s identities and roles.

Similarly, in the poem “Tsolts’ijboñ/Soy Alfabeto,” Peñate Montejo employs a traditional Ch’ol narrative style to transmit an event-determining message. *Mi yäl*, is a particle deeply embedded in Ch’ol oral tradition and symbolizes the earth’s manifestation in its people and their environment. (Texts of the supernatural) However, according to Lydia Rodriguez, in her article “From Thought to Discourse,” the quotative particle *Mi yäl* (“s/he/they say”) in Ch’ol, serves to frame a report of one communication within another—especially speech within speech. Adding what Lucy (1993) explains, that this particle “provides a means for framing a report of one communication within another,” creating a separation between the content of the speech and the speaker. And suggests that in Ch’ol and other Mayan languages like Mopan, this device is particularly important when reporting speech under conditions of uncertainty or doubt. This distancing mechanism, she asserts, is especially significant withing cultural frameworks that place a high value on truthfulness, making the clear indication of hearsay a necessary practice (Rodriguez). The form for *mi yäl* is in the plural in the poem below—*mi yälob* ‘they say’. Through this poem, the profound connection between identity, nature, and tradition comes to life:

Tsolts'ijboñ

Mi yälob cha'añ ixojokñäyeloñ matye'el lok'embä ilayi,
mi yälob cha'añ itsajakñäyeloñ kolem matye'wits,
mi yälob cha'añ mi kpuk ñumel itsajakñäyel xotyñup'ulbä,
mi yälob kpächälel tsajakña tyi pa',
mi yälob cha'añ tsolts'ijboñ yik'oty isäkjamtyäleloñ ili lum.
Mi yälob cha'añ joñoñäch, chä'äch mi kmulañ mel kbäj.

(Peñate Montejo, 24)

Soy alfabeto

Dicen que huelo a hierba nacida en esta selva,
que mi cuerpo tiene fragancias de montaña,
dicen que esparzo un ambiente de huerto,
que mi piel está impregnada de perfume de río,
dicen que soy alfabeto y luz de esta tierra.
Dicen que soy, y que así me manifiesto.

(Peñate Montejo, 25)

I am the Alphabet

They say, grass born in the forest,
my body holds the freshness of mountains.
I have absorbed the garden's blossoming,
my skin soaked by rivers.
They say, "I am the alphabet."
Bright light of morning is how I show myself.

Translated from Ch'ol into English by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Friedman

(Three Poems from Chiapas, World Literature Today)

In this poem, *Tsolts'ijboñ/Soy Alfabeto/I am the Alphabet*, Peñate Montejo not only "recovers" the Ch'ol poetics to "report/transmit" that uses the anaphora "Mi yälob/Dicen que/They say," which is a literary figure that consists of the repetition of one or more words at the beginning of a verse, to give rhythm or add a poetic character to what is written. In this poem, she "reports" what has been passed down throughout history about the Ch'ol, what's been said and written about them but now is being "said" and written by a Ch'ol poet, not a *kaxlañ*, reinforcing her voice and self-determination. The decision of the poet to translate the title of this poem in Spanish and English as "I am the Alphabet,"; adds a sense of irony but also authority to say, "what has been said/manifested" about them in her own written words with their own "alphabet."

In conclusion, we focused on the hybrid cultural elements in Peñate Montejo's poetry that demonstrate interculturality, mutual interaction, the exchange of both cultures and self-determination in the realms of sovereignty. A key aspect of this analysis is the availability of three versions of most of the poems, which allows deeper questioning and exploration of Ch'ol traditions and worldviews. As we observed by journeying through Peñate Montejo's poems, the voice and messages inserted are hybrid, in correlation to Canclini's proposal regarding the spaces of intersection of cultures.

Chapter III

Self-translation of *Chajk*, *Chuchu'*, *X'ixik*, and *Mis huellas*: authorship and agency.

Self-translation studies is a fairly new field of study; however, its practice is nothing new; it dates back to the earliest human civilizations. From ancient times, and thanks to the vestiges found, we can see that ancient civilizations also sought to record their passage through the world, either through glyphs carved in stones or with painted images. Self-translation has been the way to “leave a mark;” however, inevitably, the “legitimization” of these depends on the filter of whoever interprets and translates these traces. This “filter” refers to the compendium of beliefs and values that “the translator” has that influence the final narrative. And where legitimacy is defined as the point of view of the dominant party or the one with the authority to define it.

Over the years, there have been various attempts to “interpret” and translate native languages and cultures. Thanks to the curiosity and scholarship of many individuals, the information recorded since the first explorers' arrival is preserved. However, as we have already discussed, some chroniclers and colonial writers produced summaries to “digest” this information. In contrast, others sought to “exploit” it to serve their own interests, omitting anything that did not align with their goals.

Therefore, the translation of indigenous languages is inherently political, as these languages often emphasize orality, lack standardization, and encompass various dialects. While many serve as both a mother tongue and a primary language for daily communication, some critics view translation from indigenous languages as a double-edged sword. It can help preserve vital cultural heritage and ways of life, yet it also threatens their survival. By overlooking the

original language, translation may diminish a language's autonomy, making it less visible and reducing motivation for learning or using it among speakers.

Researchers studying self-translation are interested in the concept of *teloi*, which refers to the editorial, aesthetic, ideological, economic, or commercial motivations that drive authors to translate their own work (Anselmi 2012).

Leaving aside the political aspect, from the literary perspective, it is easier to understand why the first chroniclers made these interventions. Many of these cultures did not have an alphabet comparable to the colonizing civilizations, and this became one of the most criticized and exploited “discoveries” used as a tool of power. However, these civilizations have always had their own ways of transmitting knowledge and heritage; pictorial, allographic, or oral.

Another key aspect of this discussion is the relationship—whether horizontal or asymmetrical—between the languages involved in self-translation. This relationship affects how the complexities of meaning are conveyed. Since most indigenous languages are primarily oral, the transmission of the embodied emotions is usually magnified by reciting them out loud and translating them into occidental rhetoric figures or by using reflexive pronouns that may not exist in the source language but because of the author's knowledge of the culture of the target text; she can find a way to translate the “highlighted phrase,” the last words of the poem “Mi cuerpo tu primicia,” where she opted for words such as “primicia” and “me penetras” to generate it.

Juana Peñate Montejó's poetry draws on Ch'ol oral traditions, using them as inspiration to shape the structure and rhythm of her written work. Through these, she reflects the Ch'ol worldview while conveying messages of cultural and gender reclamation and redefinition.

Indigenous poetic works usually navigate two or more sociocultural universes, forming a literary system marked by specific appropriations of spoken language within a written discourse, dealing with issues of bilingualism or multilingualism and multiculturalism. As Violeta Percia notes, writers are engaging in dialogues with their ancestry and identity in these literary works, highlighting their “new ways” of making their cultures visible and revaluing specific hermeneutical enclaves. Emphasizing that it is crucial to closely examine these interactions and linguistic exchanges revealed through the translation efforts of these writers, this exploration is vital for understanding the need to situate the forms of an epistemic alterity. The translation scene serves as a key space for addressing the colonial structures that affect culture and language in today’s globalized world (Percia).

The Ch’ol have preserved much of their worldview through oral traditions, including terminology, prayers, and rituals that sustain their harmony with the earth. In recent years, efforts to revitalize the Ch’ol alphabet have gained momentum; driven by passionate researchers who have not only immersed themselves in learning the language but also sought to understand the culture deeply. We could consider Juana Peñate Montejo among these enthusiastic researchers, who has taken a leading role in a major project to foster dialogue and bridge the gap between Ch’ol and other languages.

Juana Peñate Montejo’s poetry serves as a reflection of both the collective memory of the Ch’ol community and her personal experiences as an intercultural subject. The poet uses the vehicle of Western literary forms to convey her voice, recovering the memories and histories of the people in her community. According to Angel Rama, this process can be seen as transculturation, but it is more accurately described as hybrid intercultural literature based on Lepe Lira’s framework (Lepe Lira). This perspective emphasizes a blend of cultures that arises

not from imposition but from the poet's intentional use of Ch'ol in her original versions and Spanish in her translations (Ortiz).

Peñate Montejo is not the average resident of her community. As mentioned earlier, indigenous communities lack access to bilingual quality education. Most families teach their kids Ch'ol first and then they learn Spanish when attending "regular" school. However, for Peñate Montejo, during her academic years, a lot of turmoil and movements were happening around her community and to acquire education, she had to move to another city. Having access to other opportunities allowed her to take courses and diplomas in literary creation and to spread her work in magazines like *Nuestra Sabiduría* (Chiapas). Today she is the coordinator and promoter of cultural projects for the county of Tumbalá. Therefore, her achievements are a testament to the quality of education's role in her success. Additionally, her strong desire to speak and write in Ch'ol stems from her commitment to reconnect with her roots and preserve her cultural heritage.

It is apparent that poet Peñate Montejo challenges and pushes the boundaries of the "imposed" standards to their maximum limit. While she meets the basic requirements for inclusion in indigenous literature groups and contests, she skillfully navigates the complexities of self-translation in today's world. In an era where nations are moving away from a focus on homogenization or *mestizaje*, self-translation has become a powerful tool for writers like Peñate Montejo, who, through it, are "transcribing" their inherited experiences and emotions about their "indigenous" world as well as the realities and struggles of their present-day life, all as seen through their unique worldview, writing beyond folklore and exotism. This shift reflects the demands of marginalized/subaltern groups, who now insist on their inclusion, protection, and recognition. These social movements have led governments to "pretend" to want to comprehend cultural differences, aiming "to include" these groups as a strategy to prevent further unrest.

Coexistence on equal terms requires differences, challenging all forms of inequality across social spaces. Intercultural relations involve not just “including” diverse elements to highlight their multicultural origins but rather decentralizing power and fostering dialogue in all social interactions (Ortiz). This approach needs to recognize and value different epistemic perspectives, acknowledge alternative ways of interacting and relating to nature and understand concepts such as economy, democracy, health, education policies, women’s roles, work, and knowledge production.

However, this process is far from straightforward; government institutions may outwardly support these causes (or pretend to), but many of them are still deeply invested in keeping certain populations ignorant and disconnected. This allows them to manipulate these communities during elections. The same government is not interested in the raising of intellectuals or scholars that “bring light” and knowledge to these communities, which is likely why, to this day, groups like the Ch’ol and others lack adequate educational material in their native languages to promote the study and preservation of these languages and cultures. Efforts have been made, but the real support has been minimal.

In this context, Peñate Montejo exposes the tensions of self-translation while exploring the Ch’ol female voice and identity between two worlds. Critics and scholars from various disciplines have argued about whether authors should carry out their own translations; some stand in favor, while others are against it. These critics have raised concerns about the fidelity of the message and worldview, the author’s fluency in both languages and their bicultural knowledge and understanding.

Diana Fuss proposes the usage of contradiction for this kind of analysis as a tool, as it allows us to approach both sides of the binary pair with the same rigor, to be both judge and part

of, to think more broadly, and to run the risk of “abandoning the security -and fantasy- of occupying a single subject position and, instead, occupying two spaces at the same time.”(Diana Fuss) Therefore we will use the method of comparing and contrasting Peñate Montejo’s poems included in her poem book *Ipusik’al Matye’lum/Corazón de Selva/Heart of a Wild Land*,

We shall refer to the Ch'ol source text and its self-translation and translations into Spanish and English, highlighting the relationship between the self-translation version and the equivalence of possible cultural elements.

By comparing these translations, we can position her poems in the category, drawing from Lepe Lira’s framework, within the hybrid literary tendency. For this chapter, this tendency is understood as the integration of “extended messages” to/from the Ch'ol “cosmovision,” contributing to the writer's agency and authorship. This process also introduces profound questions regarding convergence, such as the poetic voice’s fidelity to the “cosmovision,” the relationship between oral and written literature, and the intricacies of self-translations.

Examples of these types of tensions include poems with “untranslated” terms. Among the translations that stand out for the author’s agency to keep an untranslated word thanks to her deep understanding and engagement of both cultures are the poems “Chajk” and “Chuchu’.” The self-translation of these works reflects the nuanced navigation of both linguistic and cultural landscapes, standing out the poet’s authority over the translation and her ability to bridge two worlds in her writing by leaving untranslated words such as in the following poem:

Chajk

Mi jk’ajtyiñ ap’ätyälel, chajk
joñoñ ik’älaloñ xu’chajk,
lok’sabeñoñ jiñi machbä tyajbilib.
Ña’tyañoñku.

K'ajtyibeñoñku yik'oty iwujtyaj jiñi ik'.
Mach joñoñik,
jiñi pañchañ machbä añik ityamlel,
woli ksäkläñ tyi wäyel,
iyilo' pañumil kty'añ.

Chajk

Invoco tu fuerza, chajk
soy el ímpetu de tu relámpago,
desgarra de mí lo imposible.
Descíframe.
Interrógame con el soplo del viento.
Yo no soy,
el cielo sin horas,
busco en mis sueños,
el nacimiento de mi palabra.

Chajk

Lend your strength.
I am flame born from lightning's strike.
Take from me what I will never know.
Understand me.
Ask for me with a breath of wind.
I am not like the sky,
eternal.
While I sleep, I am searching
for the birth of my voice.
chajk – rayo/lightning

(“La Poesía Es Como La Lluvia, Como El Viento, Como El Caminar.” LALT by Juana Peñate

Montejo, Carol Rose Little, Charlotte Friedman)

Even though Peñate Montejo leaves the word Chajk untranslated in her Spanish self-translated version of this poem, the same term later appears in another poem but is translated, giving us a glimpse of what goes on in her creative and translation process. Perhaps due to previous cultural breaches, as the author and expert, she decides when to translate these terms and when to leave them in their original language and leave *chajk*.

Chajk is a manifestation of the God of lightning in the Maya cosmovision, especially within the Chol communities. Some described him as distant and non-interactive with humans, though he responds to prayers directed to “Don Juan” (owner of the cave) by bringing rain. In a Tseltal story about the formation of the Agua Azul River, *Chajk* also appears as a remote figure. Additionally, *Chajk* is believed to protect communities from malevolent spirits. While there are no direct accounts of human encounters with Chajk, recent research, such as Karen Bassie’s 2002 fieldwork, provides more insight into his figure and possible “younger *Chajks*” (Josserand).

As an expert in both the Ch’ol worldview and Western culture, Peñate Montejo understands that translating the Ch’ol deity Chajk merely as “lightning” or “intense light” would dilute the divine significance that the Ch’ol community attributes to Chajk. Such a translation would undermine the depth and power of the deity, weakening the very purpose of her writing, which is to “recover” and “transmit” the Ch’ol worldview to the Occidental. For Peñate Montejo, preserving the full meaning of “the rendition” to Chajk is essential to convey the proper cultural and spiritual context in her work.

Nevertheless, as introduced earlier, in some of her poems, she self-translates *chajk* as “lightning,” demonstrating her expertise in communicative strategies in both languages. For example, in the poem “Chuchu’:

Chuchu'

Tsa' jk'aja koj tyi apusik'al kchuchu',
jiñi kaxlañ ña'tyibal woli imiloñ, woli its'u'oñ.
Che' jiñi tsa' tyili ach'ujlel bajche' lakmam:
Jatyety ipäk'ilety matye'el, icha'añety
ch'ixikña kch'ujlel tsa' majli,
kbäk'tyal tsa' sujtyi che' bajche' chajk.

Chuchu'

Me posé en tu corazón chuchu',
mi pensamiento injertado me ahoga y me aprisiona.
Tu espíritu vino como rayo, se internó en mí:
Tú eres de la naturaleza y de ella serás
mi espíritu se agitó,
mi cuerpo fue chajk.

Chuchu'

Chuchu', I rest in your heart.
Thoughts of the kaxlañ were strangling me, devouring me,
then your spirit came like thunder.
You are of the forest, you belong to it.
My soul shook,
my body became lightning.

Chuchu': grandmother

kaxlañ: non-indigenous

Her decision to translate *chajk* reinforces the poet's authority and her nuanced approach to language. In the Spanish version, she translates *chajk* as "rayo que se internó en mi" (a ray that settled in me), while in the final verse, she leaves the term untranslated: "mi cuerpo fue chajk" (my body was chajk). By this deliberate choice, she preserves the spiritual and cultural weight of the term, which is the name of the deity *Chajk*.

In terms of translation, it is ideal to observe and contrast her self-translation of the previous poem with the English version, to catch on even more nuances that could not have been possible to grasp without the help of the third version. The English version translates *chajk* in both of its appearances: first as "thunder," and in the final appearance, as "lightning." Furthermore, the English version provides the meaning of the terms at the bottom of the page to leave their interpretation in the poem to the reader. This contrast also reveals the poet's deliberate choice to emphasize the sacred and untranslatable nature of the terms.

Another set of poems that portray a similar variation in her self-translations of "untranslatables" are the following two poems with the word *x-ixik*:

Kyejtyal

Itsäñälel klum

mi kchumtyañ ach'ich'el

che' bajche' p'ip'bä x-ixik

mi käsiñ ty'uchtyañ majlel pañumil.

Mis huellas

Frío de mi tierra

habito tu sangre
como mujer vivaz
mis huellas juguetonas por el mundo.

Footprints

Cold earth,
I live in your blood.
An intelligent woman,
I walk lightly through the world.

(NDQ, Special selection on literature in translation)

X-ixik

Acha'añäch ili tyamlel, x-ixik
mi ajoch' majlel abäk'tyal yik'oty k'uxel
mi awäk' abäk'tyal che' bajche' melbilbä xajlel
che' bajche' mi aboñ abä tyi yujts'il pom
cha'añ ma'añik mi ijijlel ap'ätyälel.

X-ixik

El tiempo es tuyo, x-ixik
entrelazas tu vida con dolor
entregas tu cuerpo como piedra labrada
como si te bañaras del perfume del incienso
para que tu fuerza nunca termine.

X-ixik

Time is yours, x-ixik,
embroidering your body with pain
like stone to chisel, you give yourself up,
bathe in the sharp fragrance of incense,
so that your strength will not run out.

x-ixik – woman

(“La Poesía Es Como La Lluvia, Como El Viento, Como El Caminar.” LALT by Juapana
Peñate Montejo, Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Friedman)

The poems “Mis huellas” and “X-ixik” feature the word *x-ixik* but with different translation choices. In the poem “X-ixik,” the word is left untranslated, while in “Mis huellas,” it is rendered as “woman.” Unlike the term *chajk*, which we discussed earlier is a deity in Ch’ol cosmovision: *x-ixik* does not represent a divine figure, it means “woman.” This translation decision goes beyond mere “recovery” of the cultural term; it reflects Peñate Montejo’s authority over her self-translations and self-determination of the Ch’ol women. By presenting *x-ixik* untranslated in some poems and translated in others, she asserts her agency in (re) shaping the word and the way Ch’ol women’s identity and roles are conveyed.

As noted, indigenous literature is multi-glossic, challenging conventional conceptions of oral and written cultures. In oral traditions, writing, if it does not have a vital connection or if it separates the abstract content from the lived experiences, it is seen as meaningless. To be able to engage with these texts, readers must “penetrate” a level of understanding that positions them as intercultural participants or privileged reader-translators and become dialogue facilitators between cultures (Lepe Lira 34).

This perspective allows for the understanding that translation may be challenging, especially when it comes to finding precise word equivalents, connotations, or grammatical structures; in words of the translators of Peñate Montejó's poetry in English:

“As this is the first time Peñate's poetry has been translated from the original Ch'ol to English, each choice we made to change a word, line break or syntax was the result of careful deliberation and discussion with many steps in between in the initial translation and the resultant English poem” (Little & Friedman).

Mutual influence is inevitable, but “total domination” or homogenization is no longer required. Peñate Montejó aims to reconcile and share her cultural knowledge with ours, striving for a mutually enriching exchange without endorsing past abuses or unfulfilled promises. However, she will continue to shout” “we are here, and we will not be silenced!”

I believe the Ch'ol will gain much more visibility soon. However, skepticism remains, especially among those focused solely on financial metrics and unable to see a direct connection with “the wealth” of these groups. However, Peñate Montejó offers us a valuable perspective: we must pause to admire and learn from our ancestors, as true wealth lies within them. What is needed now are more bridges of dialogue to make this mutual enrichment not only possible but impactful and lasting.

Also, the study of self-translation in Juana Peñate Montejó's work gives light to the intricate relationship between language, identity, and culture within the context of indigenous poetry. Peñate Montejó's poems, particularly “Chajk”, “X-ixik”, and “Mis huellas,” reflect the dynamic translation process of navigating multiple linguistic and cultural worlds. Through her deliberate choices of when to translate and when to leave terms untranslated, she claims her authority as poet and translator, opting to preserve the spiritual and cultural weight of these Ch'ol

“abstract” concepts while respecting and engaging with Western literary forms. Her work challenges the traditional boundaries of translation discussed in the framework, not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a tool for cultural reclamation and self-determination.

Her poetry demonstrates how self-translation is a political act that reveals the tension between the need to preserve indigenous languages and cultures and the pressures of translating into more dominant languages. Peñate Montejo’s approach to translation underscores the importance of “recovering” and retaining the nuances of the Ch’ol worldview, mainly terms like *chajk* (god of/ lightning) and *chuchu’*,” (grandmother), which hold deep cultural significance beyond their literal translations. By doing so, she resists the homogenizing forces of colonization and globalization, creating space for indigenous voices to be heard and understood on their own terms.

Finally, Peñate Montejo’s work invites us to reconsider the role of self-translation in fostering intercultural dialogue and challenging colonial rigid structures. As the world becomes more interconnected, her poetry serves as a powerful example and reminder that real mutual enriched influence comes from recognizing and respecting the diverse epistemologies and worldviews across cultures. In this view, the works of poets like Peñate Monterjo are not just a creative endeavor but a political and intellectual one that calls for a flexible and broader understanding of the value of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. As we look to the future, the continued effort to build bridges of dialogue between cultures is essential to ensure that the voices of subaltern communities are heard and valued.

Conclusions

According to Alejos, “oral tradition” refers to the body of knowledge that each society generates, preserves, and shares verbally as part of its collective social and cultural survival. In this sense, oral tradition is a fundamental aspect of culture, functioning as an institution as ancient as language, responsible for transmitting ideas, knowledge, perceptions, and values across generations. For millions of years, the collective memory of people worldwide has been entrusted to this tradition, relying on its stability to preserve and reproduce cultural content (Alejos García).

In his article *Indigenous Philosophies*, Miguel van der Velden argues that reducing indigenous traditions to mere myths and stories is a form of cultural colonialism. He emphasizes that deeper understanding arises from considering a variety of perspectives. Van der Velden proposes that indigenous philosophies should not be placed above or below Western and Eastern philosophies but rather recognized alongside them, enriching global philosophical and literary discourse (van der Velden).

These perspectives have significantly influenced the rapidly emerging movements within contemporary indigenous literature, highlighting the need for new forms of literary expression that reflect the rich indigenous world. This world is steeped in ancient knowledge transmitted orally through generations. Despite the rise of pragmatic ideas, theories, and societal changes, these communities are finding new spaces to “penetrate” with their literary works. While some perspectives may have shaped indigenous knowledge for better or worse, contemporary indigenous writers are also creating spaces to pause, reflect, and appreciate the depth and complexity of indigenous narratives.

Analyzing these literary works requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates the various concepts and perspectives to fully understand the messages and worldviews that shape these realities. Therefore, it is crucial to study the oral devices in their writing, the origins and functions of oral narratives, and the beliefs and values embedded in their verses. In present days, we are witnessing the emergence of new writers who either learn or teach themselves to represent elements of their traditions in written form, contributing to the ongoing preservation and transformation of collective memory.

In the case of poet Juana Peñate Montejo, her work is deeply inspired by the Ch'ol oral tradition. For the Ch'ol, oral traditions are not simply a mode of communication but a complex system with specific styles and functions. In Chapter I, we explored her poetry, aiming to uncover the cosmovision present within the oral tradition of the Ch'ol. Peñate evokes the spirit of these oral rituals and ceremonies through her rhetoric and self-translation, even without explicitly naming them.

To better understand Peñate's art, we relied on the literary tendencies proposed by Luz Lepe Lira in her essay "Lluvia y viento." Lepe Lira identifies three literary tendencies within indigenous literature: the "recovery of memory," the "recreation of tradition," and the "hybrid" (Lepe Lira). These categories helped identify recurring elements and strategies in indigenous literature. The poems then can be categorized as follows:

1) Recovery of Memory: In this category, Peñate Montejo's poems reflect the vocabulary, speech, and lyrical structures passed down through generations and present in ceremonies and rituals. Her work awakens a desire to learn more about ancestral modes of communication and how their worldview aims for harmony with the earth and all its inhabitants.

Poems such as “Mi cuerpo tu primicia,” “Manantial de mi existencia,” and “Tu creación” all manifest elements of this tradition. A central theme in these poems is the *ch’ujlel* ‘my soul,’ a term used to represent the spirit bestowed upon all living and non-living beings in Ch’ol culture. The *ch’ujlel*, for the Ch’ol, is the essence of the earth, and the Ch’ol believe it is their responsibility to nurture and grow this essence for the benefit of the community.

The Ch’ol have always practiced communal living, believing that everything in the world serves a purpose, including oral prayers and chants. The oral tradition is not merely a form of communication but a way of preserving the spiritual and social fabric of the community. It is a miracle that these traditions have survived into the present day, and Peñate Montejó’s poetry helps keep them alive. Through her work, she not only recovers the memory of the oral tradition but also reinforces new ways of thinking and presenting the Ch’ol worldview. Her poetry can be seen as a “text model” of a new type of Ch’ol poetry, one that integrates ancestral wisdom with contemporary thought, which will serve for future analysis and research.

2) Recreation of tradition: In this category, Peñate Montejó’s poems reflect “new” elements added to the “main tradition.” Poems like “Soy” and “Joñoñ xty’añoñbä x-ixik/Soy una mujer Ch’ol” utilize Ch’ol terms that may be present in oral tradition, but it isn’t the norm. However, these also have the characteristic of resembling oral Cho’l speech. In these poems, Peñate Montejó “introduces” the feminine perspective and view around the question of what is to be a Ch’ol woman. She not only “recovers” words from tradition but “recreates” the identity of the Ch’ol woman. This idea of the “new identity” could be reinforced when analyzing the poem “Manantial de mi existencia.”

A distinctive feature of Peñate Montejó’s poetry is her emphasis on a feminine and corporeal perspective. Throughout her work, she consistently uses feminine experience. This is

further enhanced by her incorporation of bodily imagery, where she names various body parts to mirror the body of nature, connecting physical sensations and movements to the natural world. This approach is evident in poems like “Tu aroma,” which explores the intimate relationship between the body and nature.

In addition to her recreation of tradition and her exploration of Ch’ol women’s self-determined identity, another significant aspect observed in Peñate Montejo’s poetry is her translation process. The act of self-translating her work not only bridges languages but also serves as a means of reinterpreting and reshaping the cultural and personal narratives embedded in her work.

3) Hybrid: this category tendency refers to a blending of tradition with new perspectives, often shaped by self-determination and the poet’s personal experiences. In poems like “Madre Selva” and “Soy,” we observed the intersections of these traditional and contemporary experiences. The poetic voice in these works dialogue with identity, questioning its place in a world of oppression while affirming its origins and characteristics. In “Soy,” the poetic voice proudly claims its identity despite the forces of discrimination represented in the last verses, that seek to marginalize them.

In Chapter 2, we explored these “new thoughts” introduced by Peñate, including themes of identity discovery, gender affirmation, and the feminine perspective. For instance, in the poem “Manantial de mi existencia,” the poetic self-exclaims, “Soy mujer”--an affirmation of the speaker’s identity as a woman. In the poem “Joñoñ xty’añonbä x-ixik/Soy una mujer ch’ol,” written after *Corazón de Selva* was published, the speaker further reaffirms her hybrid identity. In this chapter, we identified two identities in dialogue: one that longs to remain connected to the

sacred—its origins, the jungles, nature—and another that recognizes the unavoidable necessity of navigating through multiple worlds to survive, be heard, and reclaim sovereignty.

Writers like Peñate Montejo engage in dialogues with their ancestry and identity, highlighting their “new ways” of making their cultures visible and revaluing specific hermeneutical enclaves. Therefore, it is crucial to closely examine these interactions and linguistic exchanges revealed through the translation efforts of these writers; this exploration is vital for understanding the need to situate the forms of an epistemic alterity. The poetic or cultural text is a symbolic space for these tensions, similar to territories, borders, and contact zones. Here, the conflicts inherent in various cultural projects and their metaphors and imaginations are articulated (Percia).

Furthermore, the dialogue between “oral traditions” and “written expression” within Indigenous literature invites a reconsideration of the nature of cultural preservation. As scholars in translation studies and decolonial theory have pointed out, translation—whether literal or metaphorical—always entails the loss and transformation of meaning. Yet, it also allows indigenous writers to “revalorize” their traditions, creating spaces for intercultural exchange and political reflection.

Indigenous poetry, particularly through the work of poets like Juana Peñate, is vital for reimagining and strengthening indigenous identity. It bridges the ancient and the modern, between languages and cultures, and between generations. By navigating the complexities of translation, hybridity, and self-determination, Indigenous writers like Peñate are crafting literary works that preserve their cultural heritage and challenge, reshape, and reassert their place in the world. As such, their poetry is a crucial act of resistance, a reaffirmation of Indigenous

worldviews, and a celebration of the transformative power of language in the pursuit of justice and autonomy.

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