



Tongues of the Popol Vuh: Diction Indexing Diction—Forms Informing Form

The Popol Vuh is a K'iche' Mayan story of creation that, notably, delays creation until its final pages. The larger share of the book tells the story of creational mishaps, hesitations to create, considerations of the role of language and sacrifice in creation, a series of descents to the Underworld to learn the necessity behind creation, the coming to life of the animals and maize, and finally the story of the first humans who help to bring the first dawn—that is, creation—into being. As such, most of the book takes place in a kind of penumbral anticipation just before the dawn—a book-length *apeiron*, as it were—in which various gods, demi-gods, animals, proto-humans, and humans try to bring a kind of boundedness of time (the dawning, the days) into existence. This exercise is explicitly routed through acts of language: what is needed to bring about the dawn from the darkness is a proper way of speaking, of ordering the world in language, which—the book says—is continuous with a proper way of seeing. The book calls itself “*ilb'al*” (which means “instrument for seeing”) and says that this instrument is presently lost, in spite of the fact that the thing that is saying so is there, before us, that is, the book itself.¹

¹ The Popol Vuh calls itself an “instrument for seeing” on its first page (folio 1 recto) and its last page (folio 56 verso). Luis Enrique Sam Colop suggests that the phrase is used in “apposition” to the book’s name (Popol Vuh), both synonymous with that name (i.e., Popol Vuh, which translates as “Book of the Mat” or “Book of the Community”) and mirroring it in parallelistic speech (202 [my translation]). Furthermore, in describing the book as an “instrument for seeing” on the first and last page, its authors encapsulate the book in this definition, a definition that is itself doubled in the framework of mirrored doubling (first page, last page) that is distinctive of Mayan poetic speech.

Why would the present object say that it is not there? How could that be? A bit of textual history helps to clarify the book's point. The object itself, the only extant version of the original K'iche' Mayan story of creation was transcribed by a Dominican friar sometime around 1701. Internal evidence from the text (i.e., the way it locates itself in Mayan history) suggests that this friar was working with an older text of the Popol Vuh (likely written, but possibly oral, and most certainly in consultation with Mayans in Chichicastenango who still held that older text) that dates to shortly after the arrival of the warlord Pedro de Alvarado in 1524. The book itself is highly reflexive about its colonial context. Its preamble decidedly situates the story of Mayan creation "amid the preaching of God, in Christendom now," and says that such is the event from which has ensued the situation of not being able to see the book, to see "our place in the shadows," to see "the dawn of life" (Tedlock, *Popol* 63). In this opening sequence the book equates its penumbral anticipation, in its moment in the darkness before the dawn, with the darkness of colonialism. What cannot be seen cannot be seen because the right way of speaking is now blocked. What must be done is to unblock the right way of speaking, to unfold the way of telling the story of creation, to lift up again that *ilb'al*, in order to give rise again to the dawn, in order to see once again the days.

While he delivers the only extant version of this very old story of creation, the colonial friar named Francisco Ximenez is not exactly a hero in this story. As a dedicated functionary of the Catholic Church, Ximenez was instrumental in the colonial uprooting of indigenous culture and the transplanting of European belief into Mayan minds. His transcription of the Popol Vuh is explicitly framed as an action in this broader project of what Néstor Quiroa has called colonial "extirpation." So what we receive of the Popol Vuh today was originally bound up with a kind of colonial factbook aimed to help convert the indigenous population of Spanish Guatemala. This four-part conversion manual included a grammar of three Mayan languages; an "art of evangelization" (or guide for the conversion and governance of indigenous people); the story of the Popol Vuh itself; and a series of "*escolios*" or commentaries on the Popol Vuh that do not equivocate in telling readers

that these stories are likely inspired by the devil, if not by the sheer “erratic” nature and ignorance of the Mayans (Quiroa). Unlike other less archivist colonial friars, such as the zealous Diego de Landa who burned all the Mayan books he could find in Yucatan, Ximenez tried to channel the idolatrous Mayan tales into proper Catholic form, to use them in the project of evangelization. So he delivers the Popol Vuh to posterity, but it is given over in the cast of dark colonial days in which the book sees itself. If it is to speak, it must speak through Ximenez, meaning that its prospect for speaking is indeed dark.

Pictured above, at the beginning of this essay, is a moment in the manuscript of the Popol Vuh when its mediation in Ximenez interrupts the story, when we can see clearly the darkness in which it finds itself. The left column is the transcription of the K’iche’ Mayan, and the right column is the Spanish translation. Toward the bottom of the image you can see a parenthesis on both sides, with words in Latin on the left and Spanish on the right (“*Demonium loquens eis*” on the left, and “*Demonio q’les hablaba*” on the right). In those languages those words mean “the devil is speaking here” or “the devil spoke henceforth to them.” This is Ximenez’s only parenthetical textual interruption in the entire book, and it is surprising for how late it occurs (folio 36 verso), nearing the end of a book that has been *filled* with what Ximenez would have considered idolatrous gods, incorrect speech, and damnable stories. So why here? In a perverse way his demonization of the scene kind of makes you want to read it more closely.

At this point in the story the hero twins have long-ago descended into the Underworld to receive the blessing of life-giving maize, the first humans have been made from that maize, and they are presently in a state of migration trying to find a place to settle and the right words with which to appease the gods and give rise to the dawn. But they haven’t quite figured out the right language with which to pay their debt to the gods, and they worry if they’ll ever do so: “Alas, is our language now abandoned? What have we done? We are lost. Where were we deceived? We had but one language when we came from Tulan. We had but one origin and creation. It is not good what we have

done” (Christenson 199). At this moment of crisis and deep anxiety a person reveals themselves to these first humans, a messenger from Xibalba or the Underworld; that is, Ximenez’s demon, who says:

“Truly Tohil is your god. He is your provider. He is also the substitute and remembrance of your Framer and your Shaper. Do not give, therefore, fire to the nations unless they give something to Tohil in return. It is not to you that they shall give. Rather your desire must be to go before Tohil. Ask him what they shall give in return for the fire,” said the person from Xibalba. He had wings like the wings of a bat. “I am a messenger from your Framer and your Shaper,” said the person from Xibalba. (Christenson 200)

The appearance of the bat-winged spiritual broker in the story is no less surprising than the intrusion of Ximenez’s demonological commentary in the text. Both appear out of nowhere, and each appears to vie for the redemption of Mayan lifeworlds. Yet, whereas the bat-winged being emerges from within the mythworld of the story, Ximenez’s demon arrives from outside it. One is intimately possessed by the interior of the Popol Vuh, and the other discloses something at a distance. One comes from its underworld and the other from across the ocean. One irrupts in it and the other interrupts it. One is a volcano and the other is a coming storm.

It was at this crossroads of insides and outsides that I lingered when I read Daniel Tiffany’s sleuthing essay, “Speaking in Tongues.” As I thought through his elaboration of a poetics of diction as a kind of exteriority internalized—as a kind of “distant object” that “discloses its substance” and “special authenticity and immediacy” through its close contact or even contiguity with the spoken world, and that thus renews the poem and gives it some sense of “the evolution of a community”—my mind kept coming back to this moment in the Popol Vuh, to this crossroads of story and text, when its inside literally bursts on to the surface, where it is met by an arriving outside trying to get in. In so many ways, Tiffany’s conception of diction helps to see the poetic qualities of this scene of simultaneous irruption and interruption. It is, after all, a scene of diction indexing diction:

Ximenez's Latin and Spanish commentary is telling us that this is the devil speaking. In that indication, in that dictional interruption to introject a new speaker (i.e., the devil), readers get the trace of a real social world contextualizing the telling of the Popol Vuh in 1701, that is, the world of colonial incorporation. While Latin and Spanish are still marginal languages in the eighteenth-century Guatemalan highlands where this text is transcribed, the principle of incorporation is there in their appearance in a text whose larger framework as a colonial factbook is designed to help convert the Mayans to Christianity. I call it a factbook to allude to the World Factbook produced by the CIA as a resource for US government officials. Like that Factbook, Ximenez's factbook has an intelligence-gathering function. Tiffany demarks this function as also intrinsic to diction. Diction gathers information about "a world that is out of range," he writes, "though not perhaps unknowable." Diction interrupts and surveils at the same time, simultaneously "signing and auditing, addressing and spying." The deeper motivation for such surveillance is to change the world that is being surveilled. Diction discloses its substance in order to perform a world into being. In Ximenez's "*Demonio q'les hablaba*," it discloses the secret demonism of the Mayan mythworld in order to translate that precarious mythworld into a valley of hidden demons. And that valley is, of course, mapped in the visionary atlas of Christendom.

This is all true—that is, it is all consonant with what we know about how colonialism consolidates its cultural power—and it is all helpfully highlighted by Tiffany's conception of diction. But it doesn't really connect with the spirit of Tiffany's essay. Tiffany's essay turns to diction as a kind of antonym for form. He characterizes form as a kind of inwardness to which diction is opposed in its outwardness. And he associates this sense of outwardness with various concepts of revitalization, performativity, sociality, authenticity, immediacy, intimacy, genealogy, and communality or even *communitas* (in the anthropological sense of unstructured absorption in an external world). To be sure, in his account such an outward conception of diction does not relieve it of contradiction or anxiety. As his nuanced reading of Philip Sidney's conception of diction as the

“out-side” of poetry (as that aspect of poetry that “touches” the world and draws it in) makes clear: such exposure is exposure indeed, to the *contradictions* and *predicaments* of social and political worlds. These sites of contradiction and predicament are a kind of pivot back into revaluing and complicating the poetic sense of diction. And still, Tiffany’s essay is driven by a spirited understanding of diction that seems to equate it, contradiction and predicament notwithstanding, with the emancipatory energies of exposure; so that, in a sense, diction is to form as exposure is to constraint and outreach is to enclosure.

And while I understand that the essay is concerned primarily with certain trends in contemporary poetry, Tiffany’s deeper genealogical and etymological reach into the transhistorical constellations of diction (the appearance of Sidney for instance, alongside Ossian, Aristotle, and others) give the sense that he is indeed talking about diction as such, and poetic form as such. So I think that it is finely mapped onto this moment in the Popol Vuh when Ximenez’s diction indexes diction to chart a new terrain for the Mayan mythworld. But, as I’d like to show now, I do not think that it is the only terrain that is being charted there. And I do not just mean that there is K’iche’ Mayan diction in the passage. Of course, there is. What I mean is that there is also Mayan form in it, which is pushing back on the colonial interruption, conditioning it and speaking around it, reminding its readers of the linguistic forms informing the world form of the present speaking.

Indeed, if one were to imagine an excerpt of this section of the Popol Vuh, and had to title it for a table of contents, one would be well served to use the subtitle of Tiffany’s essay: “Poetry and the Residues of Shared Language.” After all, in it these first humans tell us that they “are lost” insofar as they had “but one language when [they] came from Tulan,” that they had “but one origin and creation.” In the pains of this loss, in the depths of the anxiety of having lost their shared language, they summon the bat-winged being. This being then instructs them in the arts of representation, giving them a kind of theory of divine representability: “Truly Tohil is your god. He is your provider. He is also the substitute and remembrance of your Framer and your Shaper.” At

this moment, the bat-winged being (who is likely Camazotz, a death-bat god of sacrifice that resides in the underworld) speaks to these first humans in a classic Mayan structure of diphrastic or parallelistic speech: your god/your provider; substitute/remembrance; your Framer/your Shaper. In fact, one of the central themes of the Popol Vuh is that humans have to learn to speak in this way to honor the gods. The relation between poetic parallelism and divine speech hinges on a Mesoamerican idea that the cosmos is dialectical, but it is a special kind of dialectic, in that it never resolves into synthesis. In their constant self-differencing, Mesoamerican paired items never settle into a stable identity or essence, but rather remain conditioned and animated by the fact of their disidentification in some other thing. This gives the phenomenology of the Mayan mythworld a jittery or oscillating quality, as any being is always in relation to some other being, producing intermixed signals in any one being's utterance, so that meanings are always changing in the inescapable pull of multiplicity, discontinuity, and dis-identification (Tedlock "Toward" 183-84, 186-87). In this mythworld, structure is conjuncture, being is beings, meaning is discrepancy, and identity is difference. What Camazotz is telling these first humans, then, is that their true language—the residue they must recover to find their shared language, the *substitute* and *remembrance* of what *framed* and *shaped* them—is here in his speech patterns, in his way of speaking in twos, which he relates to real sacrifice. Blood will pay the human debt to the gods; but split speech will channel that offering appropriately.

And I cannot emphasize enough how widespread the emphasis on such speech patterns in the Popol Vuh is. It is its formal lifeforce, coursing on every page, standing up to the very context in which those pages are inscribed. That is, the book itself is savvy in its self-location against Christendom. While it admits that it is written “now amid the preaching of God, in Christendom now,” its entire project is to “bring it[self] out” of that darkness: “we shall inscribe, we shall implant the Ancient Word, the potential and source for everything” (Tedlock *Popol* 63). You will certainly have noticed the layering of parallelisms in these sentences, enfolding the context of Christendom

into parallelistic Mayan form, and staging thus the relation between Mayan poet and Catholic transcriber in dyadic Mayan world form. If there must be Christendom, the book says, it will be inside the design of the mythworld of the Popol Vuh. Form here, then, is not a retreat inward. It is an act of capturing the situation in which the Mayan poets found themselves, unfolding an exterior in which the new speaking of Christendom, the new tongue, with its diction, will be spoken. The world unfolds in this way—deictic, to be sure, but indicating itself through its poetic forms informing world form: “This is the account, here it is:”

Now it still ripples,
 now it still murmurs,
 ripples,
 now it still sighs, and
 it is empty under the sky.

Here follow the first words,
 the first eloquence:
 There is not yet one person,
 one animal,
 bird,
 fish,
 crab,
 tree,
 stone,
 hollow,
 canyon,
 meadow,
 forest.

Only the sky alone is there,
 The face of the earth is not clear.
 Only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky,
 there is nothing whatever gathered together.
 It is still at rest,
 not a single thing stirs.
 It is kept back,
 still kept at rest under the sky.
 Whatever exists is simply not there:
 only the pooled water,
 only the calm sea,
 only it alone is pooled.
 Whatever might be is simply not there:
 only murmurs,
 ripples in the dark,

in the night. (Tedlock, 2000 313-15)²

This speech isn't just talking about creation. It is enacting it. It is unfolding creation in the form in which creation must happen: substitution as remembrance, structure as conjuncture, being as beings, meaning as discrepancy, and identity as difference. When the Popol Vuh describes itself as *ilb'ul*, that is, an instrument for seeing, this is what it is talking about. It is proposing its form as theoretical and historical form, as a way of seeing, understanding, and shaping artistic expression, conceptual interpretation, and historical knowledge. It is not just mere *content* to be interpreted and interpolated

² Tedlock's technique of lineating the parallelism of the Popol Vuh was developed in collaboration with the K'iche' Mayan attorney and scholar of the Popol Vuh, Luis Enrique Sam Colop. In his *2000 Years of Mayan Literature*, Tedlock only translates a selection of sections from the Popol Vuh in this way. Sam Colop translated the entire book in this way, into Spanish. Below, I offer Sam Colop's Spanish-language version of the above quoted section of the Popol Vuh to give credit to the work that Sam Colop and Tedlock did together, and to give credit to Sam Colop's own pioneering work in describing the poetic form of the Popol Vuh (in his published translation of it and in his unpublished dissertation, "Mayan Poetics," for the PhD he received at the State University of New York at Buffalo). Sam Colop's translation here also showcases how the poetic form of the Popol Vuh moves across languages and captures local linguistic effects (for instance, the artful mirroring of the Spanish "*ésta*" and "*está*?" echoing the passage's figural parallelism) into parallelistic speech:

Ésta es, pues, su narración:
 todo está en suspenso,
 todo está en reposo,
 en sosiego,
 todo está en silencio;
 todo es murmullo y
 está vacía la bóveda del Cielo.
 Ésta es, pues, la primera palabra
 la primera expresión:
 cuando todavía no existía una persona
 ni animal,
 pájaro,
 pez,
 cangrejo,
 árbol,
 piedra,
 cueva,
 barranco,
 pajón,
 bosque,
 sólo el Cielo existía.
 Todavía no había aparecido la faz de la Tierra,
 sólo estaba el mar en calma
 al igual que toda la extensión del Cielo.
 Todavía no había nada que estuviera junto
 que hiciera ruido,
 que se moviera por su obra.

by European form; it is *the form* by which to interpret and illuminate the world beyond itself. This is in fact one of the book's touchstones: it offers frameworks for expression and interpretation explicitly. It wants us to think in *its forms*—to think in terms of the heterogeneity, polyphony, translatability, non-isomorphy, reciprocity, recurrence, and revision embedded in its parallelism.

So, in the end, the Popol Vuh does in fact give us a sense of its sense of what are “the residues of a shared language,” but it does not develop that sense through its diction only. Its distinct forms prefigure the appearance of Ximenez's demon, interpolating that demon in dialectic oscillation with the bat-god Camazotz. At that crossroads, diction meets diction in a broader framework of structural interanimation, a Mayan world of persistent parallels.³ Adorno is right: “that spot is bewitched” (qtd. in Tiffany). But the Popol Vuh has the means by which to anoint that interanimation of form and context as something other than witchcraft. In the conceptual form of the Popol Vuh, the *meeting* of Ximenez's dialogic demon and Camazotz's dyadic poetics is *itself* dialectic, non-synthesizing and persistent. That encounter is resoundingly internal to the structure of the mythworld of the Popol Vuh, while also external in its capture of the historical moment of text's inscription.

³ My gratitude to Analú María López, Ayer Librarian at the Newberry Library in Chicago (where the Popol Vuh manuscript presently lives), who pointed out such vital moments in the manuscript to me. It is worth noting that Ximenez's dictional interruptions (i.e., “*Demonium loquens cis*” or “*Demonio q'les hablaba*”) do not appear in any of the English- or Spanish-language translations of the Popol Vuh that I know. Mention of these interruptions is typically made in the paratextual apparatus of a footnote or endnote in the published translations (such as the ones that I cite in this essay). Such paratextual apparatus interrupts the text, commenting from a more contextualized voice, while setting itself thus apart. In that regard, it comes to function in ways consonant with Tiffany's conception of diction—here, speaking to you now. While such elision of colonial diction into the paratext seems appropriate for foregrounding the indigenous text itself, paradoxically it gives the dictional interruption more force than it warrants. My sense is that the Popol Vuh is designed to handle such interruption, to configure and cast it inside Mayan form. After all, Ximenez's fatal flaw—his *hamartia*, if you will—was to be convinced that he could capture the content of Mayan stories in Catholic world form (the format of the conversion manual and *the* world form in which Camazotz is a demon speaking to Mayans). But the Popol Vuh has its own form—its own sense that it is *the* world form, and its own means for enacting that world. And who today considers Ximenez when thinking about *the* Popol Vuh? Indeed, the outstanding quality of the Popol Vuh is its ability to capture all such local features of historical crisis (colonial and otherwise) into its framework of parallelism and the concepts associated with parallelism: heterogeneity, polyphony, translatability, non-isomorphy, reciprocity, recurrence, revision, and dialectic.

And the Popol Vuh is certainly not the only indigenous work of the Americas that is savvy about how *its forms* inform a conception of form as such. I am thinking of the recent collection of essays edited by Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton, *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*. The editors of this collection emphatically state that one of the most important shifts in the study of indigenous literatures is a turn of attention to form, to thinking about these literatures not just as content, but rather very much as process, as “intentional form which shapes the content that is garnered through its exploration” (5). They add that this shift moves “away from a focus on a static idea of ‘Native information’ and, instead, emphasizes the dynamic process of ‘Native in formation’” (5). Such a shift does not necessarily turn away from the discursive contexts of a given work, it only highlights how the formal niceties of a given work—the Popol Vuh, for instance—actively participate in shaping the dialogic and social world in which it finds itself.

And this seems to me to be quite in keeping with the spirit of Tiffany’s observation that in ballads—especially Scottish “border ballads”—a poem’s diction can envelop, and at the same time be folded into, its form. Considering such parallelisms of the poem itself, I will leave you with one last example of a Mayan poem encountering its diction indexing diction, while its forms inform a sense of form transforming the linguistic groundwork of the poem. This poem is from a late collection by recently deceased K’iche’ Mayan poet Humberto Ak’abal, translated from Ki’che’ Mayan into Scots by Rosemary Burnett and James Robertson. It tells the tale of an old, old people—our first humans, maybe—who went looking for new languages, and who found instead a form of discrepancy, derangement, and perhaps even sheer translatability in which their language was at last transformed. In this world, creation must happen on the last page, at the end of the great rise and descent of a long, long night:

The tale is tellt
o an auld, auld people.

Scunnered wi their ain tung—sae it’s said—
they set themsels tae biggin a ben—

mool upon mool—
till it raxed up intae the clouds.

Up yonder, it wis tellt,
they haundit oot languages.

Sae they thocht they'd try it oot...

Ye had tae hae baws tae get up there.
The first thing tae dae
Wis cowp a wheen muckle drams.

On the wey back doun,
ye were jist haiverin, pure pish...

but in anither language! (32)

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