

## **Indigenous *Poiesis*: The Semiotics of Circulation in Villegas' Maya Poetry<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

This chapter textually analyses the poem “Kukuláankil” / “Pulso” [Pulsation], composed bilingually in Yucatec Maya and Spanish by Mexican poet Wildernain Villegas Carrillo, and published in 2009. I will argue that the poem evinces a Maya philosophy whereby *poetics* emerges from a larger category of *poiesis*, or creative potential, as a fundamental property of nature. Through intercultural dialogue between the Maya poem and “Western” theoretical perspectives, I seek to demonstrate how “Kukuláankil” presents poetry as emergent from wider semiotic cycles that encompass all that exists. This dialogue is itself an instance of the semiotic circulation depicted in the poem, in such a way that both the poem and the chapter depart from a basis of resonance and empathy rather than detached objectivity.

Villegas' poem forms part of what can be called the Maya Literary Renaissance, a movement that, since the final quarter of the twentieth century, has sought to reclaim Yucatec Maya as a literary language, following centuries of linguistic marginalization since the Spanish Conquest. Yucatec Maya is spoken in the north of the Yucatan Peninsula which comprises southeast Mexico, Belize and part of Guatemala, and pertains to the wider Mayan language family which stretches across southern Mexico and northern Central America. In most cases, the same bilingual authors produce the work in both Spanish and the indigenous language. Following other scholars<sup>2</sup>, I view both versions as complementary dimensions of a unified poetic piece, rather than as equivalent or as existing in a hierarchy of authenticity.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Wildernain Villegas Carrillo for giving permission to reproduce his poem, and Paul Worley for his very helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul Worley and Rita Palacios, *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'iib as Recorded Knowledge* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), 149. <https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/unwriting-maya-literature>

Accordingly, part of my discussion will involve contrasting the Maya and Spanish forms of the poem.

### ***Kukuláankil: A Maya Concept of Poiesis***

Wildernain Villegas Carrillo was born in 1981 and is a lecturer at the Intercultural Maya University of Quintana Roo, Mexico. “Kukuláankil” / “Pulso” [Pulsation] forms part of the compilation *U K'aay Ch'i'ibal / El canto de la estirpe* [The Song of the Lineage], which won the prestigious Nezahualcóyotl Prize for Literature in Indigenous Languages of Mexico in 2008 and was published by the Mexican government the following year. The poem heads the section entitled “U kukuláankil Mayab” / “Latidos del Mayab” [Pulsations of the Mayab], *Mayab* being the Maya term for the Yucatan Peninsula. The poem’s position, and the repetition of its title in that of the whole section, indicates its significance in introducing the section’s main conceptual thread.

The term *kukuláankil* comprises the root *kukul*, which, as a verb, means “to ebb and flow like the sea” and, as a noun, denotes a “wave”<sup>3</sup>. The suffix *-ankil* conveys a notion of cyclical, repeated action<sup>4</sup>, so that the whole word means both “pulsation” and “to pulsate”. By characterizing the Yucatan Peninsula in terms of this concept, the section’s title constitutes the region as a living, dynamic system of natural rhythms, in a way that resembles Robert Thayer’s definition of the “bioregion”: “a unique region definable by natural (rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Alfredo Barrera Vásquez et al., *Diccionario Maya Cordemex* (Mérida, Mexico: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980), 347. Translations mine.

<sup>4</sup> Barrera Vásquez, *Cordemex*, 17.

political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities”<sup>5</sup>.

This sense of human and nonhuman modes of existence constituting a holistic, intertwined network resonates strongly with Villegas’ poem. Indeed, “Kukuláankil” is followed by other poems that evoke mythical beings, natural elements, and animals that all form part of the Peninsula’s distinctive character. The section closes with a poem about the “voice” (“T’aan” / “La voz”), whose Maya title also means “language”, thereby locating human expressions within the web of nonhuman “pulsations” set forth in the preceding poems. As we will see, a similar structure can be educed from the opening poem, making it a microcosm of its wider context, just as it presents poetry as emergent from the *poiesis* of nature.

In the Spanish version, by contrast, the poem’s title does differ from that of the section in which it is placed, with the former rendered “Pulso” [Pulse] and the latter “Latidos del Mayab” [Beats of the Mayab]. While *latido* [beat] suggests the heartbeat, *pulso* [pulse] evokes the channelling of this vitality throughout the whole system, in such a way that the Bioregion is poetically constituted as a living organism within which each element plays a part. The interaction between the Spanish and Maya versions can itself be understood as part of this dynamic semiotic web.

### ***Poiesis and Pan-Semiosis***

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Thayer, *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), 3. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520236288/lifeplace>

While temporally and geographically distant, the philosophical perspective that informs “Kukuláankil” resonates with the Greek concept of *poiesis* (ποίησις) which derives from the verb *poiéō* (ποιέω), “to make, do, produce”<sup>6</sup>, and is the origin of *poiētēs* (ποιητής), “maker, inventor, poet”<sup>7</sup>. Władysław Tatarkiewicz explains how, for the Classical Greeks, “the poet was akin to a creator just as was the demiurge”<sup>8</sup> or “architect of the world”<sup>9</sup>. The Greek perspective is not identical to the perspective evinced by Villegas, because, in the former, *poiéō* was restricted to only certain entities (notably, humans and the demiurge), while, in my interpretation of “Kukuláankil”, creative potential is present in all of nature. However, the important point is that *poiesis*, the key attribute of poetry, was believed to operate at a cosmic, not only human, level.

Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela deployed the term in their neologism, *autopoiesis* (“self-creation”), which extends *poiesis* to encompass all life-forms, in view of their self-sustaining capacity. Further demonstrating the etymological and conceptual link between *poiesis* and poetry, Maturana identified Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* as the inspiration behind the new term<sup>10</sup>. A similar perspective can be found in Ingold and Hallam’s thesis that “creativity is *not* a faculty of the disembodied mind, [...] whose designs are actively imposed upon a world of matter that is effectively dead”<sup>11</sup>, but rather “a process that living beings undergo as they make their ways through the world”<sup>12</sup>. For these authors,

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<sup>6</sup> Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*: Ninth edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1940 [1843]), 1427.

<sup>7</sup> Liddell et al., *Lexicon*, 1429.

<sup>8</sup> Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics* (The Hague: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1980 [1975]), 252.

<sup>9</sup> Tatarkiewicz, *History*, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980 [1972]), xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam, “Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction,” in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (Oxford: Berg), 2007, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ingold and Hallam, “Creativity,” 11.

creativity obtains “in the circulations and fluxes of the materials that surround us and indeed of which we are made”<sup>13</sup>. By including within the orbit of “creativity” not only life, but also the materials that constitute life, Ingold and Hallam enable an even wider application of *poiesis* than we find in Maturana and Varela’s term<sup>14</sup>.

The philosophy of turn of the century semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce also offers a highly productive framework for interpreting this concept. According to Peirce, all processes in the universe are explicable in terms of three fundamental categories: Firstness (possibility or potential that may or may not be realized), Secondness (the realization of this potential as a specific thing or event) and Thirdness (the connection, or mediation, between Firstness and Secondness, out of which regularities emerge)<sup>15</sup>. This triad informs the structure of the sign, which Peirce defined as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”<sup>16</sup>; despite this wording, his system applies well beyond human contexts to encompass any process in nature. As anthropologist Eduardo Kohn puts it, “[t]hanks to this living semiotic dynamic, *mean-ing*...is a constitutive feature of the world and not just something we humans impose on it”<sup>17</sup>. Peirce’s pan-semiotic formulation dissolves the duality between “mind” and “matter” that we find in the original Greek conception of *poiesis*, thereby anticipating the advances made decades later by Maturana and Varela. In addition, by explaining phenomena in terms of the transition between the latent possibility of Firstness

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<sup>13</sup> Ingold and Hallam, “Creativity,” 11.

<sup>14</sup> The connection between the work of Tatarkiewicz, and Ingold and Hallam was, to my knowledge, first made by Alba Rosas Flores in “Modos de cortar e integrar: etnografía comparada de los procesos de materialización entre ladrilleros de Santa Bárbara Almoloya e ingenieros electrónicos de Electronic Cats en México”. (PhD diss., Universidad de las Américas Puebla, forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler. (New York: Dover), 1955 [1940], 322–323.

<sup>16</sup> Peirce, *Writings*, 99

<sup>17</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013), 16. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520276116/how-forests-think> New Materialism presents a congruent perspective, as can be seen from the title of Karen Barad’s extraordinary book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

and the actualized specificity of Secondness, his system supports Ingold and Hallam's thesis that creativity lies in improvisation rather than innovation<sup>18</sup>; in other words, phenomena do not come from nothing but instead emerge from an extant field of relationships.

Conceptualizing poetry as emergent from wider poietic processes in nature echoes Kate Rigby's invitation to read eco-poetry not as "a voicing of the more-than-human natural world, but, more humbly, simply [as] a response"<sup>19</sup>. If environmental literature and its academic study are positioned as co-participants in a wider more-than-human dialogue, then the question of *representations* (and their attendant hierarchies) is replaced by one of *resonance* on an equal footing. This is the perspective that, in my interpretation, lies at the heart of Villegas' Maya poem. In this section, I have attempted to trace a theoretical widening of *poiesis* from the exclusive province of the human and divine minds to life, to all of nature. While not every scholar I have cited discusses the term explicitly, *poiesis* features as a central conceptual schema that connects their diverse perspectives. In the rest of this chapter, I seek to demonstrate that "Kukuláankil" offers its own, distinctively Maya, take on *poiesis*, whose semantic orbit continues to expand through cross-cultural dialogue. I will do so by quoting the poem in full, with Villegas' Maya and Spanish versions followed by my (necessarily imperfect) English translations. The divisions into sections are my own; there are no separate stanzas in the poem, which comprises a single, continuous work.

## **Earth and Water**

The poem begins at the confluence of land and sea:

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<sup>18</sup> Ingold and Hallam, "Creativity," 3.

<sup>19</sup> Kate Rigby, "Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis," *New Literary History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 438. DOI: [10.1353/nlh.2004.0045](https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2004.0045)

K'a'naab ku kukuláankil,  
k'a'naab ku bonik bóoxilo'ob chi' ti' sam,  
tuunich ku sutik paaxil ja',  
ja' ku tsikbaal yéetel tuunicho'ob,<sup>20</sup>

El mar en su latir,  
el mar que dibuja labios a la playa,  
la piedra que vuelve al agua música,  
el agua platicando con la piedra,<sup>21</sup>

The ocean pulsating,  
The ocean painting lips on the sand,  
The stone rendering the water music,  
The water conversing with the stones.

The simplicity of the first line conveys the calmness of the primordial ocean (*k'a'naab*), rhythmic and eternal, the prototypical *kukuláankil*. The repetition of the same noun and verbal structure complements, formally, the sense of regularity that has already been introduced semantically, and is itself continuous with a long tradition of parallelism in Maya verse<sup>22</sup>. The verb itself changes, however, being no longer *ku kukuláankil* [pulsating] but *ku bonik* [painting]. The combination of formal regularity and semantic difference indicates a

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<sup>20</sup> Wildernain Villegas, *U K'aay Ch'i'ibal, El canto de la estirpe* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 2009), 59.

<sup>21</sup> Villegas, *K'aay*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Allen Christenson, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007 [2003]), 44-49. [www.oupres.com/books/9782129/popul-vuh](http://www.oupres.com/books/9782129/popul-vuh)

perturbation in the waves; in Peirce's terms, new forms of Secondness, or contrast, emerge from Thirdness, or uniform regularities.

The perturbation in question is the encounter of the waves with the land, a meeting that the poem depicts as a creative, poietic act, through the verb *bonik* [to paint] and the imagery of "lips" (*bóoxilo'ob chi'*). The Mayab, or Yucatan Peninsula, emerges with communication and creativity as its primary characteristics. Here, the words of Hubert Zapf are apposite:

The special significance of the seashore for a cultural ecology of literature is linked with its conspicuous in-between status...The beach has a certain stability, yet is constantly changing; it is a site of regularly recurring rhythms and irregular morphodynamic shifts and transformations. It was central to the emergence of life, and, as a place of transition between sea and land, has been crucial to the evolution and continuing survival of human cultures<sup>23</sup>.

This interplay of rhythm and transformation is the central theme of the opening lines, which portray the land as emergent from the pre-existing regularities of the sea. In the case of the Mayab, this is literally the case, for the whole limestone peninsula is formed of marine deposits. From this perspective, the beach is not only a point of spatial but also of temporal connection. Yet the land reciprocates by transforming its progenitor into music (*paaxil*), conveying the cyclical aspect of time in both Maya philosophy and Peircian semiotics: a new, creative, cycle (Thirdness) emerges from the initial disruption of Secondness.

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<sup>23</sup> Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 189. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/literature-as-cultural-ecology-9781474274654/>



Land and ocean combine in a process of mutual transformation where the poietic agency of both elements plays a central role, recalling Ingold and Hallam's insights on the capacity for improvisation that exists throughout nature. Wendy Wheeler notes how, of "all our mimetic capacities, music has by far the greatest power to move us with a terrific immediacy"<sup>24</sup>, and suggests that it may be a precursor to language in human evolution. Just as the ocean is the prototypical *kukuláankil* (undulation), so music (*paaxil*) may be the art form that connects us most deeply to our more-than-human origins.

In the fourth line, the creative pattern comes full circle, as the water (*ja'*), with its newfound dialogic capacity born of its encounter with the land, communicates in turn with the stones (*tuunich*). If the Maya term *kukuláankil* represents Peircian Thirdness (habit, mediation) par excellence, the fourth line presents another variation on this theme: *tsikbaal*. This key concept in Maya philosophy means both "story" and "conversation"<sup>25</sup>. Paul Worley describes how *tsikbaal* "by their nature are dialogic, implying the participation of both storyteller/author and listener/reader in the performative act"<sup>26</sup>.

Villegas himself describes how *tsikbaal* is also a research methodology, as formulated by his erstwhile teacher, Juan Ariel Castillo Cocom<sup>27</sup>. *Tsikbaal* is deployed "not just to obtain answers, but to establish a closer connection with the interlocutor"<sup>28</sup>, a connection that is,

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<sup>24</sup> Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2006), 143. <https://lwbooks.co.uk/product/the-whole-creature>

<sup>25</sup> Allan Burns, *An Epoch of Miracles: Oral Literature of the Yucatec Maya* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 19. <https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/burepo>

<sup>26</sup> Paul Worley, *Telling and Being Told: Storytelling and Cultural Control in Contemporary Yucatec Maya Literatures* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013), 20. <https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/telling-and-being-told>

<sup>27</sup> Juan Ariel Castillo Cocom, Ángel Cal, and Tomás Ramos Rodríguez, "El tsikbal: Paradigma de investigación maya" (unpublished).

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320369764\\_El\\_Tsikbal\\_Paradigma\\_de\\_Investigacion\\_Maya](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320369764_El_Tsikbal_Paradigma_de_Investigacion_Maya)

<sup>28</sup> Wildernain Villegas Carrillo, "Xkala' an son yéetel Pich'ito: Danza, palabra y metáfora" (MA diss., Universidad Intercultural Maya de Quintana Roo, 2017), 30. Translation from Charles Pigott, *Writing the Land, Writing Humanity: The Maya Literary Renaissance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), xix.

moreover, egalitarian in nature. By constructing an intercultural dialogue between Maya and “Western” perspectives, this chapter is likewise composed in the spirit of a *tsikbaal*, and advances an ecopoietic approach that is at once translingual, transcultural and transspecies. Villegas’ use of the term *tsikbaal* to describe the interaction between water and stone could not be a stronger affirmation of the creative potential of nature. Far from being a mute, purely mechanical process, this interaction is depicted as poietic and agential. The dialogism is emphasized by the reverse parallelism between *tuunich* [stone] and *ja’* [water], which occupy alternating positions in lines three and four.

### **Proliferation of Life**

In the following lines, the land’s emergence from the primordial ocean signals the proliferation of new forms of life:

u che’il pak’aal ku tak’ankúunsik ts’u’uts’o’ob ti’ amal ich,  
u k’abo’ob béek tu’ux tsúutsuy ku k’u’kíinsik u k’iino’ob,  
tsúutsuy ku tsikbaal yéetel iik’,<sup>29</sup>

el naranjo que madura besos a cada fruta,  
los brazos del roble donde la torcaz anida sus días,  
la torcaz dialogando con el viento,<sup>30</sup>

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<https://www.routledge.com/Writing-the-Land-Writing-Humanity-The-Maya-Literary-Renaissance/Pigott/p/book/9780367473525>

<sup>29</sup> Villegas, *K’aay*, 59.

<sup>30</sup> Villegas, *K’aay*, 135.

The orange tree ripening kisses on every fruit [face],

The oak tree's arms where the dove nests its days,

The dove conversing with the wind,

The parallelism between “u che'il pak'aal” [the orange tree] and “u k'abo'ob béek” [the oak arms/branches] emphasizes the dialogue between diverse elements of nature, while the mention of kisses [ts'u'uts'o'ob] and the polysemy of *ich* (both “fruit” and “face”) recall the allusion to lips in the second line. In combination, these features reinforce the communicative and nurturing qualities of the land. The phrase “amal ich” [every fruit / every face] suggests that such qualities arise from the existence of multiple perspectives, with each element interacting with others in an evolving, dynamic poietic tapestry (recalling Ingold and Hallam's insights on the creative intermixing of diverse materials, discussed earlier).

The play on words continues in the next line, where *tsúutsuy* [dove] resembles *ts'u'uts'o'ob* [kisses], a romantic association that is strengthened by the allusion to nests (*k'u'*). This noun occurs as part of the verb *k'u'kiinsik*, where the suffix *-kiinsik* (or *-kúunsik*) changes a noun or adjective into a transitive verb that indicates transformation in terms of the specific entity or quality mentioned; thus, *k'u'kiinsik* means “to make nest-like”, while *tak'ankúunsik*, from *tak'an* [ripe, mature], means to “ripen or mature”. This focus on transformation suggests that the diverse interactions in nature give rise, in turn, to new future possibilities, as Peirce describes in the transition from Secondness (the concrete event) to Thirdness (new regularities) and back to Firstness (new latent possibilities which may then materialize as Secondness). The parallel arrangement of this suffix in both words emphasizes the flow of creativity in the poietic field of nature.

That this creativity is predicated on dialogue is reinforced by the second mention of the verb *tsikbaal*: the dove converses (*tsikbaal*) with the wind, an allusion to its cooing call. “Breath” and “wind” are the same word in Yucatec (*iik*’), and one of the terms for “poetry” is *iik’il t’aan* (literally, “language of the wind/breath”). Just as the Ancient Greeks believed poetry to be the art form that most closely resembled the creation of the universe (as we saw earlier), so, in Villegas’ Maya verse, the original dialogue between land and sea spawns an interactive field of *poiesis* that, in turn, sows the seed of poetry in future iterations.

### **Cyclical Becomings**

As the poem progresses, humanity is revealed to be emergent from the world’s general creativity:

kaaj ku wayak’,

kool ku jaaj a’ik ma’ táan u kiimil,

sak bej ku bin,

k’uj ku suut,<sup>31</sup>

la aldea que sueña,

la milpa en su promesa de no morir,

el sendero blanco que se marcha,

el Dios que retorna,<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Villegas, *K’aay*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Villegas, *K’aay*, 135.

The dreaming town,  
The field promising never to die,  
The white path going onwards,  
The returning god.

Yucatec, like other Mayan languages, makes a distinction between two kinds of dreaming: *náay* and *wayak*. Celebrated Yucatec poet Briceida Cuevas Cob describes how *wayak* resembles a “clearly demarcated imprint” and arrives as inspiration from the magical Otherworld, while *náay* “is a light dream conceived in an earthly setting”<sup>33</sup>. While *náay* is a daydream, *wayak* is to dream with purpose and intention. This latter term appears regularly in Villegas’ work and, elsewhere<sup>34</sup>, I have discussed how Villegas uses it to describe how humanity is the result, not the origin, of an imaginative capacity at the heart of nature.

That, as humans, we owe our existence to other forms of life is indicated by the allusion to the field (*kool*) in the following line. As William Hanks describes, “cornfields are guarded by a host of spirits, both beneficent and ambiguous”<sup>35</sup>. A complex ritual cycle ensures the continual placation of these forest guardians, who, directing the flow of wind and rain, become collaborators for agricultural success rather than potential enemies. In “Kukuláankil”, the field’s “promise never to die” can be interpreted in this light, namely the location of humanity within a more-than-human communicative and reciprocal network.

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<sup>33</sup> Briceida Cuevas Cob, *El uso del paralelismo mayor entre los textos de autores mayas peninsulares de México*, 2008 (unpublished), 2. Cited in Luz María Lepe Lira, *Lluvia y viento, puentes de sonido: Literatura indígena y crítica literaria* (Monterrey: Consejo para la Cultura y las Artes de Nuevo León, and Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2010), 123. Translation from Pigott, *Writing the Land*, 193.

<sup>34</sup> Pigott, *Writing the Land*, 138.

<sup>35</sup> William Hanks, *Referential Practice: Language and Lived Space among the Maya* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 307. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/R/bo3616148.html>

The mutually nurturing relationship that obtains between the *kaaj* (village) and *kool* (field) is mirrored in the cyclical movement depicted in the next two lines. The phrase *sak bej*, literally “white” (*sak*) “path/road” (*bej*), refers to the network of limestone paths that once crisscrossed the Yucatan Peninsula and connected cities in ancient times. Angela Keller found that, during the colonial period, the term *bej* was not only associated with “transit” and “duration” but also “well-being, prosperity, life course, and destiny”<sup>36</sup>. In combination, these meanings indicate “multiple, interwoven cycles of time that form the fabric of life”<sup>37</sup> and that connect a person’s life-course to the movement of celestial bodies.

The paradigmatic example of the *sak bej* is the Milky Way, which, in Maya philosophy, is believed to constitute a passageway through which “vital essences are transmitted between this world and the next”<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, the following line, “K’uj ku suut” [the returning god], can be read in terms of the cosmic cycles that connect Earth and Sky: the *sak bej* rests on the ground by day, while, at night, when the order of things is reversed, it appears in the sky. The “god” (*k’uj*) in question would then be the Sun. Here again, Villegas presents human patterns of behaviour as emergent from general cycles or “pulsations” that operate at the cosmic level.

## Poietic Emergence

The poem concludes by explicitly recognizing its origins in a more-than-human *poietic* field:

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<sup>36</sup> Angela Keller, “A Road by Any Other Name: Trails, Paths, and Roads in Maya Language and Thought”, in *Landscapes of Movement: Trails, Paths, and Roads in Anthropological Perspective*, eds. James E. Snead, Clark L. Erickson, and J. Andrew Darling (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press), 2009, 137. [www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/14689.html](http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/14689.html)

<sup>37</sup> Keller, “A Road”, 156–157.

<sup>38</sup> Angela Keller, “Roads to the Center: The Design, Use, and Meaning of the Roads of Xunantunich, Belize” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 216.

úuchben k'u ma'atech u ch'ija'antal,  
ch'ench'enkil ku yu'ubik ak tuukul,  
manak na'an u nook',  
le t'aano'oba',  
chíinilk'iin...  
tuláakal kuxa'an  
je'e bixake'.<sup>39</sup>

la pirámide anciana que no envejece,  
el silencio que nos oye pensar,  
la estela desnuda,  
estas palabras,  
la tarde...  
todo está vivo  
de alguna forma.<sup>40</sup>

The ancient pyramid that never ages,  
The silence that hears us think,  
The naked stela,  
These words,  
The afternoon...  
Everything is alive  
Somehow.

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<sup>39</sup> Villegas, *K'aay*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Villegas, *K'aay*, 135.

The first line quoted above suggests the first law of thermodynamics, namely that energy cannot be destroyed, only transformed. In Maya, the words for “pyramid” and “god” are identical (alternatively written *k’u* or *k’uj*); the term is therefore the same as in the previous line, which means that the Maya version (more than the Spanish) emphasizes the continuity and interconnectedness of natural cycles. Moreover, Mesoamerican philosophies make no distinction between the “spiritual” and the “natural”; gods are both mind and matter, in such a way that physical forces (rain, wind, fire, etc.) have intrinsic creative agency.

The sense of underlying permanence, just as the ocean remains tranquil below the waves, is conveyed in the subsequent line by the allusion to silence (*ch’ench’enkil*). This strongly recalls Plato’s writings on the cosmos, which “maintains balance amid dynamic change, ‘a moving image of eternity’”<sup>41</sup>, and brings us back, full circle, to the Greek origins of the concept of *poiesis*, as discussed at the start of this chapter. The mention of silence “listening” (*yu’ubik*) to thoughts (*tuukul*) again suggests that consciousness is a fundamental property of nature, rather than existing solely in the human mind. The stela (*manak*), mentioned in the next line, continues the theme of communication between cosmic and earthly forces. The “nakedness” (*na’an u nook’*) could indicate the absence of writing or other carvings (a common feature on Maya stelae), suggesting the communicative openness of Peircian Firstness, an undefined realm of pure potential whence concrete forms later emerge.

The following line, “These words” (*Le t’aano’oba’*), is perhaps the most significant in the poem, since it places the entire work as emergent from the wider creative “pulsations”

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<sup>41</sup> Madonna Adams, “Environmental Ethics in Plato’s *Timaeus*”, in *The Greeks and the Environment*, eds. Laura Westra and Thomas M. Robinson (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield), 1997, 61. Original source of quote from Plato: Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d5, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, translated by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Pantheon Books), 1966.



depicted throughout. Read in conjunction with the penultimate and final lines, this phrase describes explicitly how poetry is a product of a wider field of *poiesis* that encompasses the whole of nature. The deictic suffix *-a'* emphasizes the immediacy of this emergent process, as the words also “pulsate” through the mind of the reader, who thereby becomes an active participant in the unfolding semiotic tapestry. This interpretation recalls the comments of another prominent writer in Yucatec Maya, Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech; during a conversation in 2016, Cocom Pech explained to me that writing comprises “dead words” that are “resuscitated” when read or spoken<sup>42</sup>. The line is also significant in revealing how language, instead of dividing us from the nonhuman world, is one of our most characteristic ways of relating to it. Villegas positions human language as part of the wider *tsikbaal*, or dialogue, that forms when diversity emerges out of the original undulation or *kukuláankil* at the heart of nature.

The reference to *chiinilk'iin* [afternoon or evening, literally “inclination of the sun”] dialogues both phonetically and semantically with *ch'ench'enkil* [silence] and relates to the cycle of night and day alluded to by the “white roads” earlier on. Night-time, like the wild forests that surround Maya settlements, is a context where structures are broken down and playfully reassembled, before regaining a degree of fixity and stability at the start of the new day. This cycle of creation, destruction and recreation is itself a regular and predictable one, but its vitality can only be maintained by the dips in the waves, where anti-order ensures the necessary elasticity for the whole dynamic system to operate. At the same time, for the numerous nocturnal creatures of the Maya world, night is the equivalent of the human day, when life awakens from its dreamful slumber under the tropical sun.

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<sup>42</sup> Cocom Pech, in Pigott, *Writing the Land*, 224.

The ellipsis after *chíinilk'iin* suggest an expansion to all of reality, especially when read in conjunction with the phrase that follows: *tuláakal kuxa'an* “everything is alive”. This phrase communicates a pan-vitalist perspective whereby “life” is not only a scientific concept defined by biology (e.g., *autopoiesis*) but equally a poetic concept that can designate the creativity in the whole of nature (i.e., *poiesis*). The suffix *-a'an*, added to the verbal root *kux* (to live), conveys continuous action, indicating that the self-generative capacity of the world is ongoing. The final line, *je'e bixake'* [somehow, in any possible way], evokes the myriad forms that emerge, in kaleidoscopic diversity, from the initial undulation at the start of the poem.

## Conclusion

On opening this chapter, I stated that my discussion would reveal how “Kukuláankil” evinces a Maya philosophy whereby poetry emerges from a wider field of *poiesis* (creative production) encompassing all that exists. Two key concepts in the Maya language have been central to my discussion: *kukuláankil* (pulsation), which, by forming the poem’s title, sets in motion the theme of the creative potential in nature, and *tsikbaal* (story, dialogue), which describes the actualization of this potential through an expanding communicative network: the initial undulation of the waves, the dialogue between sea and land, the proliferation of life, the reciprocal relationship between humanity and its more-than-human origins, the cosmic cycles that connect Earth and Sky, and the poem itself, which becomes aware of its own emergence from the poietic processes that it depicts.

This self-revelation in the poem’s closing lines shows the work to be less an *evocation* than an *invocation* of nature’s *poiesis*, which also encompasses the very act of reading. The two

terms indicate opposite processes; for the first, art is the origin of a secondary representation, while, for the second, art is a consequence of what it depicts. “Kukuláankil” can therefore be interpreted not as an objective attempt to encapsulate natural processes in the way criticized by Kate Rigby (as cited earlier), but rather as a view from within; it is not through detached representation, but empathetic resonance, that the poem can speak of universal themes. This chapter has likewise been crafted on the basis of dialogue across species, languages and cultural contexts, finding the universal not in what lies above, but what lies between, in the threads that weave new connections across time and space in the warp and weft of the fabric of creation.

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