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Decolonial translation in Daniel Caño's *Stxaj no' anima / Oración Salvaje*

Amy Olen, The University of Texas at Austin

ABSTRACT

Guatemalan, Maya-Q'anjob'al poet Daniel Caño critiques the legacy of spiritual coloniality for Guatemalan Mayas in his 2011, dual Q'anjob'al-Castilian book of poetry *Stxaj no' anima / Oración Salvaje*, or in English, *Savage Prayer*. In this essay, I argue that his poetry asserts a Maya indigenous critique of the imposition of Catholicism on Maya spiritual belief systems and the attempted erasure of Maya spirituality in Guatemala through assimilative practices. A key tool of assimilation for Catholic missionaries is translation. With a close reading of Caño's poems "With the Bible in Hand," "You Are Not Baptised," and "Savage Prayer," I signal the ways in which Caño's texts challenge the assimilative translations of missionary Catholicism, and Western characterisations of Maya spirituality as 'barbarism.' I argue that Caño crafts his challenges to missionary Catholicism by delineating central tenets of Maya spiritual belief systems, particularly the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and the relation between oral tradition, spirituality and the body. His work juxtaposes Maya and Western epistemologies through what I call 'decolonial translations.' Through his 'decolonial translations,' Caño critiques Guatemalan spiritual coloniality as articulated in the translation of Catholic spiritual doctrine into indigenous languages. Caño's critique thus contests the efficacy of Spanish missionary practices aimed at Maya assimilation in Guatemala.

KEYWORDS

Coloniality, catholicism, decoloniality, Guatemala, indigenous textualities, Mayas, spirituality, translation, Q'anjob'al.

1. Introduction

Guatemalan, Maya-Q'anjob'al poet Daniel Caño grapples with the legacy of spiritual coloniality for Maya subjects in his 2011 book of poems titled *Stxaj no' anima / Oración Salvaje*, or in English, *Savage Prayer*. The majority of the short poems in his collection present a contemporary, indigenous critique of the legacy of Catholic epistemological imposition on and attempted erasure of Maya spirituality in Guatemala through assimilative practices, such as translation. In the present essay, and through a close reading of three of his poems, I argue that Caño's dual Q'anjob'al-Castilian text contests the assimilative translations of missionary Catholicism and discursively destabilises a history of Western writing and practices classifying Maya spirituality as 'barbarism.' Further, by engaging what I consider a decolonial translation of spiritual coloniality, Caño asserts a Maya spiritual belief system rooted in the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and manifest in written texts, oral tradition and the body.

Central to this argument is the privileged place of translation as a site and practice of negotiation of colonial difference, and for that reason, in this essay, I think through Caño's poetry as a series of decolonial translations. We can think of Caño's strategies of decolonial translation as constituting a space of and process to negotiate spiritual coloniality and colonial difference vis-à-vis the translation of Catholic spiritual tenets into Indigenous languages. In producing a decolonial translation, Caño problematises the assimilative objectives of missionary translations produced in the service of conquest and evangelisation in Mesoamerica. In what follows, I will first say a word about the author and his background, followed by a discussion of coloniality and decoloniality, and their connections with translation. I then consider Caño's introduction to his collection of poems, followed by an analysis of the poems "With the Bible in Hand," "You Are Not Baptised," and "Savage Prayer."

Daniel Caño was born in 1967 in Huehuetenango, in the mountainous northwestern region of Guatemala. He has published his poetry in Guatemalan, French and US magazines, and in 2010, his work was included in Maya scholar Emilio del Valle Escalante's anthology of contemporary Maya-Guatemalan poetry (2010). Caño has studied philosophy, pedagogy, and intercultural bilingual education, and currently teaches Maya languages at the Maya Xela Center in Quetzaltenango. While Caño writes in his native language, Q'anjob'al, he also produces what he calls "second language" texts in Castilian based on the Q'anjob'al versions of his poems¹. His work thus appears in dual language volumes, in which his 'first language' Q'anjob'al text appears juxtaposed with his 'second language' Castilian rendition. His juxtaposed texts therefore produce a view of his writing as, in and of itself, a process of translation and negotiation of cultural and linguistic difference. In terms of content, Caño's resistive and restorative poetics centers a Maya cosmovision, or worldview, articulated from the margins of traditional knowledge/power paradigms in Guatemala, in which Ladino (or mestizo, mixed European-indigenous) writers have dominated textual production from the colonial period to the present. This ethno-cultural imbalance of written textual producers, however, has been changing over the past 20 years as more and more Maya writing is published and considered within both the Guatemalan and international literary scenes². The present essay focuses on one theme of many emerging in Caño's work: 'spiritual coloniality.'

2. Spiritual coloniality / Decolonial translation

Attempted epistemic erasure (assimilating practices) in the form of spiritual coloniality has crafted relations between Westerners (Spaniards and later Ladinos) and Mayas since the colonial period that remain in social circulation in contemporaneity. Because of Caño's clear identification of these conflictive

cultural and epistemic relationships in his work, I approach Caño's poetry through the lens of coloniality and decolonial theory. Following Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (Castro Gomez 2008: 280), we can understand coloniality as the vestiges of the epistemic foundations that supported the hegemony of European models of knowledge production in modernity. For Quijano, "coloniality consists of a colonization of the imaginary [or epistemology] of dominated peoples" and the imposition of "a mystified image of [European] models of production and meaning" (281). The legacy of epistemological colonisation lives on in contemporary coloniality, and is rooted in the social practices reifying a hierarchical relationship between populations. In Caño's *Stxaj no' anima / Oración salvaje*, the primary theme emerging is that of 'spiritual coloniality,' a practice and result of the imposition of Catholicism in Native America. I will explain the emergence of spiritual coloniality first, and then discuss the ways in which it developed through the translation practices of colonial Catholic missionaries more generally in Mesoamerica.

In 1970, Guatemalan sociologist Carlos Guzmán Böckler (1970: 46) argued that Spanish religious fanaticism and ideologies of purity of blood set the stage for the colonial order's attempt to destroy Maya religions, and for racism to simultaneously emerge as a cornerstone of colonial oppression³. As a result, spiritual persecution combined with discrimination based on skin color to polarise Guatemalan society into an indigenous/non-indigenous binary from the colonial period forward (48). The vestiges of discriminatory colonial power relationships based on spiritual beliefs and practices, or in other words, the reverberations of the spiritual conquest of indigenous populations by missionary Catholicism – the "colonization of the imaginary of dominated peoples" (Castro Gomez following Quijano – can be thought of as 'spiritual coloniality.' Spiritual coloniality, then, survives spiritual colonisation (evangelisation) and is, according to Puerto Rican scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007: 131), "kept alive in [...] culture, in common sense, in communities' self-image, in subjects' aspirations, and in many other aspects of our modern experience." In this sense, if coloniality exists as a latent force that inferiorises indigenous populations within indigenous-Western binaristic, intersubjective relationships, what we can call 'spiritual coloniality' is the inferiorisation of non-Western spiritual systems with the end goal of maintaining, after the end of formal colonialism, the hegemonic position of Western religion, namely Catholicism, to the detriment of indigenous spiritual manifestations.

Translation, however, is key to understanding the legacy of spiritual coloniality in Mesoamerica. Mark Christensen (2014: 5) argues that ecclesiastics in Mesoamerica in the 1520s and 1530s were "outnumbered and faced with the enormous task of converting natives in their own tongue,"

such that colonial clergy “composed a variety of religious texts, including manuscript catechisms and sermons in Nahuatl, Maya and other languages to convey basic Catholic prayers and doctrine.” These included translations of European works, original compositions directed to address local needs, confessional manuals, books of sermons, and manuals exacting sacramental performances (ibid).

In this way, as Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy (2009: 27) argue, translation became the primary means for assimilating Mesoamerican indigenous peoples through conversion to Catholicism and the attempted erasure of Native spiritual belief systems. These scholars argue that translation, in this context, can be understood as “a social conflict between languages and cosmologies in hegemonic and subaltern positions, respectively.” The authors also contend that:

Translation was indeed the process wherein the colonality of power articulated the colonial difference. Franciscans and Dominicans in Mesoamerica, in the first half of the sixteenth century [...] planted, so to speak, the banner of the modern/colonial world imaginary in terms of translating knowledge and establishing the principles of epistemic colonial power (15).

Although translation was and is a force behind a modern/colonial world imaginary and contemporary colonality, translation is also a means for indigenous writers to perform negotiations of differences between identity constructions, a process that Italiano and Rössner call “cultural translation or *translatio/n*” (2012: 12). Decolonial translation, as a form of cultural translation (*translatio/n*) therefore, in the present case, can be thought of as the translation of Amerindian knowledge for epistemological survival, and it is revealed, following Mignolo (2012: 25), as “border thinking” which emerges “as a place of epistemic and political confrontation.” In this regard, Caño’s work is significant because it performs a decolonial translation of Maya spirituality from Maya Q’anjob’al back into Castilian, as if encoding a Maya spiritual episteme into Castilian that challenges the Spanish missionaries’ translations of a Western, Catholic episteme into indigenous languages. This is a decolonial gesture which works against the erasure or marginalisation of culture and language, and seeks the creation of a counter-discourse to the Catholicism accompanying Spanish imperialism and its legacy in the contemporary inter-spiritual relationships among indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. By thinking of Caño’s dual-language Q’anjob’al – Castilian text as a place of epistemic and political confrontation, the ways in which Caño’s poetry signifies a decolonial translation become clear. In what follows, I consider Caño’s introduction to his chapbook, and three of his poems to highlight this author’s decolonial translation of spiritual coloniality in contemporary Q’anjob’al poetry.

3. Linking belief systems: “Seattle”

Caño opens his collection of poems with an anecdote describing the song “Seattle” by Puerto Rican musician Roy Brown. The song tells the story of Chief Si’ahl (Seattle) of the Duwamish Tribe in the northwestern United States. Some sources credit Chief Si’ahl with making a public speech in 1854 at a meeting of indigenous tribes and white settlers to discuss a treaty implementing the surrender or sale of Duwamish land to white settlers (Capra 1996: 37; 158). In the speech, Chief Si’ahl purportedly questioned the concept of private property, linking his concerns to a Duwamish belief in the spiritual interconnectedness of humans, animals, God and land. Caño quotes Chief Si’ahl’s voice, as Roy Brown interprets it in the song:

The land is one, shared by all, as the idea of God is neither white nor red, blood runs as a river, the sap of the oak runs, the heart that beats is a burning volcano and grandfather’s voice is in the waterfall’s whisper (Caño 2011: 4).

All is one, interconnected. Metaphors link the body – blood and heart – with nature, river and volcano. The waterfall echoes the grandfather’s voice, keeping it alive for future generations. However, if the land is inextricably linked to the Duwamish body – past, present and future – dividing the land into private parcels for white settlers translates into the destruction of the Duwamish people, of the Duwamish body. Making this speech to white settlers, Chief Si’ahl signals his need to communicate the Indigenous belief system linking body and land, humans and nature to those white settlers, who hold a non-spiritual vision of land use and partition.

As the introduction to Caño’s collection of poems, this message sets the tone for his critique of Catholicism’s erasure of Maya epistemological tenets by tying it to a similar process of spiritual erasure that the Duwamish Chief intuits in his speech. Further, he signals the need for indigenous peoples to clarify their belief systems to the colonising ‘other’ in a shared drive for cultural and epistemic survival more generally in the Americas. In this instance, we can think of Caño’s first translation in his work as a rendering of the Duwamish speech, one indigenous spiritual belief system that links epistemologically to a Maya-Q’anjob’al belief system. In other words, Caño’s inclusion of Si’ahl’s speech is a cultural translation that reveals continuity between two Native belief systems so as to negotiate the lacunae of knowledge between Native American populations and Western peoples in general. This is a move that we will return to again later on in this article.

4. Burning codices and translating catholicism: “Yetoq Tx’an Biblia”

Turning to Caño’s poetry itself, he begins his critique of spiritual coloniality with a critical assessment of missionary Catholicism. He does so by referencing the historical, and literal, erasure of Maya spiritual beliefs recorded in indigenous texts. His short poem titled “With the Bible in Hand” draws attention to the colonial Catholic mission of Maya epistemological erasure:

Yetoq tx’an biblia yul sq’ab’, / max nilontz’a heb’tx’an jun / k’al masanil tzet txi’ib yayji, / palta maj uj nilontz’a heb’ / koq’anej k’al jun yib’an q’inal / manxa watx’iloq yili ti, / yujtol junnej q’anej yayji (Caño 2011: 12).

Con la Biblia en la mano / quemaron nuestros códigos / y cuantos documentos hallaron / pero no pudieron quemar / nuestra tradición oral / mucho menos / este maravilloso universo / que es un solo verso (13).

(With the Bible in hand / they burned our codices / and all the documents they could find / but they could not burn our oral tradition / let alone / this marvelous universe / that is a single verse.)

Caño’s poem begins by setting the scene of the destruction of Maya writing with the reference to “they,” or Spanish Catholic missionaries, who “burned our codices” while simultaneously holding the Bible, the quintessential textual symbol of Catholic epistemology. Colonial texts detail this image. According to colonial Spanish bureaucrat and writer Alonso de Zorita in 1540 he saw Maya books in the Guatemalan highlands which “recorded their history for more than eight hundred years back, and which were interpreted for me by very ancient Indians” (271-272). For his part, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas indicates that the books:

were seen by our clergy, and even I saw part of those which were burned by the monks, apparently because they thought [they] might harm the Indians in matters concerning religion, since at that time they were at the beginning of their conversion (Las Casas in Christenson 2003: 11).

Perhaps the most infamous assault on pre-Columbian Maya textuality was carried out by missionary Diego de Landa Calderón (1941: 78), who notes how the clergy viewed Maya codices. He writes: “We found a large number of books of these characters, and as they contained nothing in which there were not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all;” he adds the observation that the indigenous “regretted [this] to an amazing degree and [it] caused them much affliction.”

In his poem, however, Caño creates a counter-history to this destruction by suggesting that burning Maya textualities was insufficient to stamp out

indigenous spiritual beliefs, since the missionaries were unable to physically destroy Maya oral tradition. Oral textualities, then, for Mayas, proves a safeguard for the perseverance of an indigenous spiritual episteme. But Caño goes further in his short poem. Given that Maya oral tradition survived the conquest, a central component of Maya cosmovision also remained alive in the belief systems of post-Invasion indigenous groups, that is, the vision of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all natural elements as referenced in Duwamish Chief Si'ahl's 1854 speech. The Spanish missionaries were not able to erase the "marvelous universe, that is a single verse" (Caño 13). In other words, they could not, in their conversionary mission, destroy the belief that all elements of the universe function together as a complete, whole system; one that perceives the natural universe as, also, verse, orality, human language, humanity. Caño's image of the Maya conceptualisation of the natural world and spirituality as poetry reinforces the centrality of textualities, oral and written, to spiritual continuity itself. In this sense, Caño signals that, despite the legacy of Western epistemological imposition and erasure, Maya poetics and epistemology thrive in a generation of contemporary Maya writers, who replenish and maintain a Maya textual, and spiritual, tradition.

This short poem also signals Caño's literary production as decolonial translation. In effect, the reference to burning Maya codices, as opposed to translating them into Spanish for the missionaries to understand, highlights the missionaries' imperialistic desire to erase Maya epistemology, since they were uninterested in assessing it as its own, and valid, system of knowledge. Following this massive destruction of indigenous written textualities, Caño suggests that a project of translation among indigenous populations occurred in which orality became the primary form of relating epistemology, a translation that forced a different rendering of Maya beliefs from codices to the oral word. This is not to say that pre-Columbian textualities relied solely on written codices, since we know that Mesoamerican writing systems were varied and included hybrid oral and written/pictorial systems⁴. Rather, the suggestion Caño makes here is that given the destruction of indigenous written texts, orality became the primary means for relating the belief system rooted in the interconnectedness and interdependence of natural elements; orality became a means to recall, or render, that which was lost in the flames. Thus the translation of written textualities into oral textualities functions as a decolonial translation in this sense because it negotiates the destructive drive of Spanish missionaries to erase Maya spirituality.

5. Rethinking the Savage: "Man Elnaqoq Hab'i"

Caño then turns to the issue of contemporary spiritual coloniality in his poem titled "You Are Not Baptised." I include the first lines of the poem below:

Ta ay junooq maktxel / yob'chi yutseb'a, / chi jalon yul koti': / "Mna elnaoq kab'i" / Chi yal elapnoq: "Lajan hach axka junooq no no" (16).

Cuando alguien comete / un acto desmesurado / *decimos en mi lengua*: / "Man elnaoq hab'i" / (No estás bautizado) / Equivale a decir: / "Sos un salvaje" (17).

When someone commits / an excessive act / *we say in my language* / "Man elnaoq hab'i" / (You are not baptised) / This is the same as saying / "You are a savage."

In this poem, the poetic voice indicates the Spanish concept of indigenous savagery translated into the Q'anjob'al language as "man elnaoq hab'i". That is to say, with the spiritual colonisation of Mayas by Spaniards, not only were religious texts translated into indigenous languages, but pejorative views of Mayas were also transferred linguistically, to the extent that they became embedded in Q'anjob'al language and culture. Caño makes explicit in this poem another translation, one he plays with to reveal the colonising drive at the heart of the conversionary project. He signals that the expression "You are not baptised" can be rendered another way. It has an equivalent: "You are a savage." By highlighting the dual meaning of "man elnaoq hab'i," Caño underlines the Spanish missionary refusal to acknowledge the validity of Maya spirituality as a belief system that is as human as Catholicism, since the alternative to being Christian is being a savage – a partial beast, a not-full human. But worse yet, because "man elnaoq hab'i" continues to be used in the present by Q'anjob'al speakers themselves, we see the force of contemporary spiritual coloniality as the legacy of epistemological derision, one internalised into Q'anjob'al Mayas' language and self-image.

However, an interesting reversal appears in this poem. When Caño introduces the Q'anjob'al expression back into the Spanish rendition of the text, he makes two decolonial moves. In the Spanish text, he italicises "we say in my language" ("*decimos en mi lengua*"), which does not appear italicised in the Q'anjob'al text, and he follows the line "man elnaoq hab'i" in the Spanish text with a parenthetical gloss highlighting a meaning of the term, which he also does not do, because he does not need to do, in the Q'anjob'al text. Both moves, I would argue, are strategies of Caño's decolonial translation because with them he is able to center the difference between linguistic and cultural groups as a statement regarding the impossibility of, or even the failure of, Spanish assimilative translations seeking to erase Maya spirituality. By italicising "we say in my language," he emphasises the content of the verse, drawing attention to Q'anjob'al as a cultural patrimony that, although used in evangelisation by Westerners, has never ceased being the primary code for Q'anjob'al speaking Mayas. In effect, this highlighted verse reclaims Q'anjob'al for Q'anjob'al Mayas,

wrestling its “identity” (our, mine) away from the missionaries and their attempts to colonise and force Q’anjob’al to express Western ways of knowing.

The intertextual gloss for its part, accompanied by the Q’anjob’al phrase in the Castilian text, is further evidence of a decolonial gesture because aesthetically, Caño forces the Castilian reader to engage Q’anjob’al, but clearly not as the translating missionaries did. Rather, readers are called to rely on the parenthetical gloss to explain the meaning of the Maya language. Therefore, Castilian-language readers are reminded of a different, “other” knowledge, one that is powerful in the poem because it distances readers from “knowing” Q’anjob’al ways of being in the world, specifically, language, and therefore claiming power over it. The Q’anjob’al poetic voice becomes the didactic translator for the Western reader, reversing the role of missionary translators translating for, and assimilating, Mayas.

But returning to the rest of the poem, Caño uses the second stanza to explain, as if to Q’anjob’al Mayas themselves, why the expression “man elnaqoq hab’i” remains alive in language. The poetic voice continues:

A juni’, max chahil yich / yallay yet max jayok / heb’ mozo kuywinaq ko xol, / kax max yahom oktoq heb’ / yul sjolom heb’ wichmam / yet chon ok yin “animalhil” / k’al yet chon apni b’ay cham Tyoxh, yowalil chi el kob’i. // iMementaq yoki! (Caño 16)

Esto es / porque los conquistadores / y colonizadores cristianos / metieron en la cabeza / de mis antepasados / que para “civilizarse” / y llegar a Dios, / había que bautizarse. // ¡Qué pendejada! (Caño 17)

This is / because the Christian conquistadors / and colonizers / put into the heads / of my ancestors / that in order to become “civilised” / and to come to God / you had to be baptised. // What nonsense!

The poetic voice views in these lines the Catholic missionary process as a spiritual brainwashing centered in the civilisation-barbarism binary on which social, political and economic relations between indigenous and Western populations in Latin America have rested since the Spanish Invasion. Such a brainwashing affected Maya ‘ancestors’ and was passed down from generation to generation, as formal political colonisation led to coloniality in the modern Guatemalan nation.

Abruptly, though, the poem ends with the poetic voice’s derisive criticism: “What nonsense!” (17). An irreverent reframing of missionary Catholicism’s discourse of civilisation and barbarism, with this final line, Caño’s poem becomes a textual contestation of the spiritual coloniality translated into Q’anjob’al. He simultaneously problematises the established binary linking Catholicism with civilisation and Mayas (identified as those who are not

baptised) with barbarism. His decolonial translational move, then, is precisely his reframing of this binary as nonsense. In other words, he renders the Eurocentric binary as gibberish, or as communicating nothing at all to Q'anjob'al Mayas.

6. Asserting Maya beliefs: "Stxaj No' Anima / Oración salvaje"

Following this poem, Caño announces a vision of Maya spirituality, as if to fill in the blanks left in the wake of attempted Maya epistemological erasure. The title poem of the collection, "Stxaj No' Anima" / "Oración salvaje" ("Savage Prayer"), presents the spiritual practices of a Maya "grandfather" to explain a belief system linking the divine with the natural. "Savage Prayer," as a counter-discursive telling of so-called Maya barbarism, describes the grandfather's prayer in these terms:

Yet chi tit speq'al txajli / chi toj xollaq te' / aton te' chi alon b'ay tzetb'il / yaq'on stxolilal q'inalej (Caño 20).

Su oración favorita / era subir las montañas / las que le revelaban / un significado profundo de la vida (Caño 21).

(His favorite prayer / was to climb the mountains / those which revealed to him / a profound meaning of life).

By traversing the mountains, the grandfather accesses the mystery of existence by immersing himself in the wonder of the natural world in quiet meditation. The poetic voice reveals that the Maya ancestor:

Chi yil an ak'un, an xumak, / te te'ej, ch'en ch'enej, no' sanik, / no' kab', no' txolol, no' tz'ikin / k'al yetoq masanil tzetyetal oynej okoq / yetoq jun skamk'ulal k'am chi nachah yali eloq (Caño 20).

Contemplaba la hierba, las flores, / los árboles, las piedras, las hormigas, / las abejas, las mariposas, los pájaros, / y todo cuanto le rodeaba / con una pasión indescifrable (Caño 21).

(Contemplated the grass, the flowers / the trees, the rocks, the ants / the bees, the butterflies, the birds / and everything surrounding him / with an indecipherable passion).

The grandfather's awe of the divine incorporates all life forms, animate and inanimate, which he observes with a love that is "indecipherable". With this adjective, Caño connects the grandfather's prayer back to the first poem studied in this presentation, "With the Bible in Hand". We recall that in the earlier poem, the poetic voice notes that despite the destruction of written Maya texts, indigenous epistemology remains alive, translated in oral

tradition. But in the poem "Savage Prayer," he relates Maya spirituality to an "indecipherable passion," one that is "illegible," or in other words, not coded, untranslatable, and inaccessible to the gaze of lettered Western Catholicism. In this regard, Caño presents Maya spirituality as an understanding that is beyond text, oral or written. It is an understanding that is beyond the word. It is, rather, inherent in the Maya being, embodied in Maya subjects. This too, cannot be destroyed by missionary Catholicism, as long as Mayas continue to exist.

Here Caño's intertextual reference to Chief Si'ahl's speech regarding Duwamish beliefs becomes more palpable. If the division of Duwamish land translates into the destruction of the Duwamish people, or body, Caño signals that the Maya body holds a spiritual connection to the land as well, and thus spirituality is multiform – spiritual and corporeal. Moreover, translation occurs at a corporal, embodied level, as Maya spirituality moves from written word and oral tradition to an incarnation that is "untranslatable" in that it is beyond human language, and beyond text. At the same time, this Maya episteme is threatened when it encounters a situation of corporeal violence. Here we can think of the wars of conquest, the enslavement of Mayas in the encomienda system, and further, the ravaging of indigenous populations post-Invasion with the spread of disease, all of which threatened the Maya body, and thus the episteme linking body, nature and spirituality⁵. Nonetheless, the grandfather's embodied episteme that Caño communicates in his poem, becomes translatable in writing. I would suggest then that the indecipherability of Maya spirituality is a reference to the Western experience of it, whereas for some contemporary indigenous people these multiple spiritual translations among body, land, nature and, ultimately, text are decolonial practices of recalling and reasserting indigenous spirituality.

Later in the poem, the narrative voice reveals in full detail the "grandfather's" spiritual practice:

Chi kamil k'ul cham mamin tu / yab'on snuq kaq'e', / sb'it no' tz'ikin k'al no' xil, / k'al masanil nuq'ej, / asan kotxutx yib'anqu'inal / yojtaq chi sa' b'ay cham (Caño 20).

Le fascinaba al abuelo / escuchar la voz del aire, / el canto de los pájaros y los grillos / y los miles de sonidos / que solo la nana naturaleza / podía proporcionarle (Caño 21).

(The grandfather was fascinated by / listening to the voice of the air, / the song of the birds and the crickets / and the thousands of sounds / that only mother nature / could provide him.)

By hearing the sounds of nature, the poetic voice suggests that the grandfather, in his prayer, listens to the non-human voices that in his belief system are children of a divine, feminised, nature. In this image of the

sonorous environment, Caño presents a spiritual episteme that centers both on parity among humans and non-humans (given the human subject listens to the non-human sounds, as such, paying them homage and respect), and on a feminised image of Mother Nature as creator, as mother of all beings. In this image we have a counter-discursive de-centering of Catholic imagery of a divine, masculine creator, prioritising humans over other animate subjects and inanimate objects.

Caño's shifting of the hierarchical binary positioning Catholicism and Maya spirituality is further challenged in the following stanza:

Txekel yili tol masanil juntzan tzetyetal ti / chi yaq' masank'ulal b'ay spixan, / yintaq yet chi toj cham b'ay junoc yatut Tyoxh / toxak'al chi jopopi yili (Caño 20).

Era claro que todo esto le daba / mayor tranquilidad al espíritu / que estar en un lujoso templo (Caño 21).

(It was clear that all of this gave him / greater spiritual tranquility / than being in an opulent temple).

In this stanza, the physical structure of Catholicism – the adorned temple – cannot provide spiritual tranquility because it is separated from nature itself. The temple is imagined as segregating humans from other natural subjects, cutting them off from the elements of the natural world which, in a Maya episteme, are inherently interconnected. Caño thus signals a fundamental difference in the relationship between humans and nature existing in Catholicism and Maya epistemology and practice. Yet this difference is precisely what colonial missionaries and post-colonial Catholicism identified as the "savage" element of Maya spirituality. The last stanza of the poem is a single verse, highlighting this difference:

Yujtu xan max b'ajlay el cham yin "nohal" (20).

Y por eso lo llamaron "salvaje" (21).

(And this is why they called him "savage".)

In an ironic twist, the poetic voice sweeps the legs out from under the Catholic label of Mayas as savages. Caño's counter-discourse identifies the spiritual coloniality promulgated by Catholicism through missionary labeling, and misunderstanding, of this basic Maya spiritual episteme. In this way, the burning of codices and the lack of translations of a Maya cosmovision into Castilian led to the misinterpretation of Maya spiritual practices, since they are viewed according to a Western worldview that creates a hierarchy placing humans above nature. In his last verse, Caño indicts Catholicism as crafting cultural difference into an epistemological condemnation of Mayas, thereby

highlighting the irony in Spanish/Catholic assumptions of indigenous savagery. In this way, his poem becomes a site of negotiation in which he performs a kind of back translation into Spanish of Maya epistemological tenets.

This is the final way we can think of Caño's work as decolonial translation. In this last poem, and in all of his poems in this collection, Caño redresses the spiritual coloniality derived from Spanish missionary practices through a new translation of Maya epistemology. How does he do this? We must recall here that after the colonial clergy burned Maya texts, and thus, the written record of Maya ways of knowing and being in the world, they went further by replacing those texts with indigenous language translations of the Bible, sermons, and sacramental ceremonies. Maya language 'scripture' became erased and replaced in this process with translations of Christianity that functioned as colonising, assimilative tools in the service of Spanish empire and conversion.

Yet, we can think of Caño's dual-language Q'anjob'al-Castilian text as a decolonial, cultural 'back translation' that problematises Christian translation's colonising legacy. While Spanish missionaries translated Western language texts (Castilian and Latin) into Nahuatl and Maya languages to assert a Western episteme, Caño translates into Spanish his Q'anjob'al texts (his poems) asserting a Maya episteme. Thinking of this as a cultural 'back translation,' the decolonial gesture in Caño's work resides in his challenging the privileged position of Catholic beliefs as expressed through missionary translation by countering them with Maya spiritual beliefs translated from Q'anjob'al into Castilian. Therefore, Caño imagines a certain re-conquest of epistemological spaces, and in doing so, he re-thinks the 'absolute truth' of Spanish spiritual conquest by offering a critique of assimilative erasure and a vision of Maya spirituality in his poetry.

7. Conclusion

In his collection of poems, Caño signals a Maya epistemology linking the natural and spiritual worlds, and critically contrasts it with an occidental epistemology circulated through condemnation and erasure. The contrast between Catholicism and Maya spirituality lends in his poems to his vision of the Maya world as interrupting and problematising the spiritual project of the West in Guatemalan history. Caño's texts are, on the one hand, expressions of a vibrant Maya cosmology and a vindication of a Maya spiritual episteme. And on the other hand, his poetry tells a counter-history of the conflictive relationship between belief systems from the vantage point of a Maya subject. However, given the ties Caño makes between the Maya experience of spiritual coloniality and that of the Duwamish tribe, his work also hints at

a shared, Pan-Native American experience of attempted epistemological erasure. In this sense, Caño's *Savage Prayer* is a significant contribution in that it challenges the imposition of Western values on Native American populations on a continental level.

Finally, Caño's work also complicates the role of translation in colonialism and contemporary coloniality by naming the destruction of Maya texts, and the attempt to force Q'anjob'al to be a tool of spiritual assimilation. He therefore signals translation's role in the service of empire and conversion. Nonetheless, he also shows how decolonial translation is a means for indigenous writers to perform negotiations of differences between identity constructions and linguistic codes. Further still, Caño's book of poetry is also an exercise in translating history from a Maya perspective. He renders it in a different voice, as in the Q'anjob'al versions of his texts, and then translates those into Spanish, as if to reverse the role of translation in the articulation of knowledge from the colonial period forward. For these reasons, Caño's decolonial translation functions in the service of Maya epistemological survival and renewal.

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Biography

Amy Olen is currently finishing her doctoral dissertation in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The University of Texas at Austin on Guatemalan Maya-Kaqchikel author Luis de Lión. Amy holds Master's Degrees in Translation Studies (2006) and Spanish and Portuguese (2010) both from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research interests include Central American and Andean Indigenous writing, and Translation Studies.

Email: amytolen@uwm.edu or amy.olen@utexas.edu



¹ Q'anjob'al (also Kanjobal) is a Mayan language spoken primarily in the northwestern region of Guatemala, and in part of southern Mexico, south of Chiapas. Q'anjob'al is spoken by an estimated 80,000 people and is considered one of the more conservative of the 31 languages in the Mayan language family. Q'anjob'al is a member of the Q'anjob'alan branch of the Mayan language family, which also includes Chuj, Akatek, and Jakaltek. See also Ethnologue.

English Translations provided are mine.

² In Guatemala, Indigenous textual production has increased since the mid-1980s for a variety of reasons, two of which include the national and international attention garnered by Maya activist Rigoberta Menchú for her testimony *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Biblioteca personal, 1983), published at the height of the violence of the 36-year Guatemalan armed conflict. In the mid-1980s, Maya cultural activists also began mobilizing around issues of Mayan language rights, which resulted in an increase in Maya writing. Currently, Cholsamaj Foundation in Guatemala has a publishing arm that promotes Maya textualities, along with Piedra Santa Editorial, also in Guatemala City.

³ Purity of blood ideologies in Spain are a product of the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and subsequent 781 years of Islamic hegemony beginning in 711 and ending with the Spanish recapture of the city of Grenada in 1492. After 1492, Spanish concerns regarding a perceived internal threat of thousands of Muslims still living in Spain resulted in codes and regulations forcing religious conversion to Catholicism for Jews and Muslims. However, forced conversion was not seen as going far enough to prevent the "threat" of Jewish and Islamic incursions into positions of power in the Spanish government and Catholic Church. As a result, regulations and codes regarding purity of blood were enacted, and individuals were forced to show "Christian" heritage. Thus the codes turned into mechanisms for legal discrimination against Jews and Muslims. As we see, these ideologies were transferred to the New World with the Spanish Invasion and subsequently organized hierarchical relationships between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples.

⁴ See also Restall, Matthew (2005). *Mesoamerican Voices: Native Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Yucatan, and Guatemala*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005, particularly chapter two "Literacy in Colonial Mesoamerica" for a description of the different writing systems among Aztecs and Mayas throughout the region.

⁵ The encomienda system in Latin America originated as a colonial institution that granted Spanish colonizers a certain number of Indigenous laborers from a particular community or region who were obligated to work for Spaniards in return for religious instruction and "protection" from enemy or warring populations. This unpaid labor, in practice, differed little from slavery, yet Indigenous political structures and organisation were allowed to remain intact, along with familial and community relations.