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3 *Aj-ts'ib* or *el letrado*? Authorial Identity in Gómez Navarrete's Bilingual Maya Poetry  
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33 Introduction  
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38 Latin America is witnessing a revival in the literary production of indigenous languages which has  
39 spread out from three main centres of origin: Mexico and Guatemala, the central Andean countries,  
40 and Chile. The indigenous literary renaissance is significant in vindicating the cultural and  
41 linguistic diversity of Latin America, yet it is fraught with tensions and contradictions, as Noriega  
42 Bernuy describes for the Andean context:  
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49 Escribir en quechua no fue ni es, como a veces se piensa, un ejercicio inocente, privilegio  
50 y curiosidad de letrados bilingües. Por el contrario, gracias a la institucionalización de la  
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3 escritura sobre la lengua, los conquistadores pudieron sujetar la voz y, sobre todo, controlar  
4 la historia en el nuevo mundo... (2011: 46).

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7 Ostria González, on the other hand, notes how, from the start of the colonial period, 'los  
8 indígenas comprendieron que la escritura era un excelente medio de sobrevivencia y memoria  
9 cultural' (2001). The two quotes provide contrasting yet equally accurate interpretations of the role  
10 of alphabetic writing among indigenous populations: an instrument of domination and of  
11 resistance. These two dimensions remain salient today and operate in the manner of opposing  
12 electric charges that lock indigenous literatures in perpetual dialogic tension.  
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21 An additional layer of complexity is present in the Lowland Maya context which has its  
22 own autochthonous history of writing that was founded on very different principles to the alphabet,  
23 yet was equally able to represent all words in the spoken languages. While this indigenous writing  
24 system had largely ceased to be used prior to the 'Conquest', its existence continues to pervade  
25 Maya cultural consciousness, and the ancient term for writing (*ts'ib'*) is still used across the thirty-  
26 one modern Mayan languages (see Otzoy 1996: 151). In this article, which centres on Yucatec  
27 Maya, I spell the term as *ts'ib*, in accordance with the contemporary orthographic conventions of  
28 that language.  
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40 The article's purpose is to take one bilingual poem, composed in Yucatec and Spanish, as  
41 a case study of the conflict between two different, yet partly overlapping, cultural understandings  
42 of 'writing' that both exert a powerful, often contradictory influence on what it means to be a Maya  
43 writer today: *ts'ib* and the *letrado*. In contemporary Maya literature, the conceptual influence of  
44 *ts'ib* is very much present, but the fact that Maya authors write their language in Roman script,  
45 perform the rituals of 'Western' literary circles (literary prizes, keynote speeches, publishing in  
46 books, etc.), and use literary conventions from the European tradition, also suggests their partial  
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3 positioning as *letrados*, people not of glyphs but of *letters*. Moreover, almost all indigenous-  
4 language authors in Mexico produce their work bilingually. Gentes (2019: 96) describes this as a  
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7 ‘double-edged sword’, since the Spanish version can either awaken readers’ interest in indigenous  
8 languages or eliminate the necessity of learning them. At the same time, Worley notes how the  
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12 ‘disjuncture between indigenous- and Spanish-language texts allows for a multiplicity of divergent  
13 readings and literary possibilities regarding what are ostensibly an original text and its translation  
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17 ’ (2017: 291-292).

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19 All of these ambiguities surface in the poem discussed in this article. Written by Javier  
20 Abelardo Gómez Navarrete (1942–2018), it is entitled ‘K’u’uk’um kaan’ in Yucatec and  
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22  
23 ‘Serpiente de regio plumaje’ in Spanish. It is the first and longest work in Gómez Navarrete’s  
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26 anthology, *In lu’um / Mi tierra*, which was published by the Mexican government in 2003. I have  
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29 chosen the poem because, in my interpretation, it conveys particularly well the conflictive dialogue  
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32 between the paradigms of *ts’iib* and the *letrado*. Gómez Navarrete, moreover, is a major and  
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35 founding figure of the Maya literary renaissance. Born in the village of Akil, he obtained degrees  
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38 in Education, History and Social Sciences and co-founded the Universidad de Quintana Roo,  
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41 where he taught Maya. Gómez Navarrete published a diverse range of works including a Maya  
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44 dictionary, Maya language manual, history of Quintana Roo state, several short stories written in  
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47 Spanish, the first ever novel written in Yucatec Maya<sup>1</sup>, and the poetic compilation, *In lu’um* (Arias  
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50 2018: 98-99).

#### 51 The Traditions of ‘Ts’iib’ and the ‘Letrado’

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56 <sup>1</sup> *Cecilio Chi’*. *Nen óol k’ajlay / Cecilio Chi’*. *Novela histórica* (2006).

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3 This article builds on Worley and Palacios' (2019) discussion of *ts'ib* as a concept that questions  
4 the extent to which 'Western' notions of the 'literary' are applicable in Maya cultural contexts.  
5  
6 Their analysis builds, in turn, on perspectives from art history, epigraphy and anthropology.  
7  
8 Houston and Stuart, for example, note that the 'lack of distinction between art and writing is  
9 fundamental to all Mesoamerican notational systems' (1992: 590). The semantic orbit of *ts'ib*  
10 includes 'figures, designs, and diagrams..., whether they be drawn, painted, engraved,  
11 embroidered, or woven' (Tedlock and Tedlock 1985: 124), and even agriculture is a form of *ts'ib*  
12 onto the landscape (Worley and Palacios 2019: 5-6). In this way, 'contemporary Maya writers  
13 must be read as dialoguing with a multimodal Indigenous understanding of text' (2019: 3);  
14 therefore, to 'single out the "literary" text as the primary point of intervention is to miss the Maya  
15 holistic conceptualization of the world and writing (*ts'ib*) under which these poets operate' (2019:  
16 197). Rather than existing in opposition to alphabetic writing, however, *ts'ib* is more properly  
17 understood as a broader category within which European forms of literacy can be encompassed  
18 (2019: 3). For Worley and Palacios, what distinguishes Maya and European conceptions of writing  
19 is not so much a radical difference as the Eurocentric *perception* of the alphabet as 'humanity's  
20 writing system par excellence to the "natural" exclusion of all others' (2019: 4).

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Ángel Rama discusses this perception in his famous critique of the *letrado* as an arbiter of  
literary sophistication throughout Latin America. From early on in the colonial period, a key  
mission of *letrados* (people with a European-style education based on the alphabet) was to convert  
indigenous societies to European ways of thinking (Rama 1998 [1984]: 33–34), as well as regulate  
the burgeoning *mestizo* population, by imposing the norms of the 'ciudad letrada' over the 'vasto  
territorio salvaje' that, in their minds, lay before them (1998 [1984]: 27). Poetry played an  
important role in this process, being 'patrimonio común de todos los letrados' (1998 [1984]: 35).

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3 Even such literary manifestations of the *letrado* tradition were instrumental in creating a sharp and  
4  
5 unequal divide between ‘history’ and ‘myth’, ‘rationality’ and ‘irrationality’, (1998 [1984]: 24,  
6  
7 38) that was entirely foreign to the conceptual framework of *ts’iib*.  
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10 Another difference resides in the relationship between signs and the physical world. In the  
11  
12 *letrado* tradition, claims Rama, signs were fixed expressions of a fundamental reality that existed  
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14 even when their physical referent did not. In this way, ‘queda consagrada la inalterabilidad del  
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16 universo de los signos, pues ellos no están sometidos al descaecimiento físico y sí sólo a la  
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18 hermenéutica’ (1998 [1984]: 23). By contrast, Worley and Palacios highlight the ‘performatic’  
19  
20 nature of *ts’iib* (2019: 20), whereby signs have no independent reality from the world they  
21  
22 represent. While the ancient glyphs commemorate past events as latent living realities, they do so  
23  
24 in dialogue with natural cycles that are eminently tangible. In this way, there is no radical  
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26 separation between semiosis and experience (see Pigott 2020).  
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31 As Worley and Palacios demonstrate, however, it would be misleading to characterize the  
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33 two traditions as existing in dichotomous opposition. Rama, for example, notes the close  
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35 relationship between writing and graphic design in the planning of colonial cities (1998 [1984]:  
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37 21), which recalls the inclusion of such designs within the category of *ts’iib*. Another commonality  
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39 is the divide between written and spoken language. While the *letrados* wrote in an archaic style,  
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41 most people were creating new, American, varieties of Spanish (1998 [1984]: 44-45). Similarly,  
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43 the Classical Mayan recorded in hieroglyphs is fairly uniform, yet it coincided with a plethora of  
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45 spoken languages. Glyphic writing was strongly associated with the supernatural (Matsumoto  
46  
47 2013); likewise, during the colonial period, ‘la escritura se constituiría en una suerte de religión  
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49 secundaria’ (Rama 1998 [1984]: 37). In both contexts, the mystical aura of writing is explained by  
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51 its restriction to a few initiated specialists, meaning that writing was also a symbol of power.  
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3 The association between writing and power is a key marker of historical continuity between  
4 the two paradigms. Restall notes how ‘postconquest Maya literature drew upon the preconquest  
5 traditions of hieroglyphic writing and oral discourse as well as on the introduced documentary  
6 traditions of Spanish legal practice’ (1997: 229). During the colonial period, Maya-speaking  
7 *escribanos* held an important position in village government, and were also known by the Maya  
8 term, *aj-ts’iibal ju’un* or ‘writers of documents’ (1997: 67); their alphabetic script, moreover,  
9 resembled ‘the detail and order of hieroglyphic text’ (1997: 239). Maya *escribanos* held an  
10 intermediate position between the colonial authorities and the local community, since their skill  
11 enabled the Spanish ‘legal and administrative system to function at the indigenous level’ (1997:  
12 83), yet many were protagonists of the nineteenth-century Maya rebellion known as the ‘Caste  
13 Wars’ (Rugeley 1996: 102-103). In these ways, literacy was both ‘a means for constraining and  
14 restricting peasants’ (1996: 101) and a key instrument in Maya communities’ defence of ‘their  
15 lands from colonial encroachment’ (Restall 1997: 234).  
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### 35 The ‘Double Gaze’ and ‘Textual Continuum’

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40 Reflecting the ambivalent history of writing since colonial times, contemporary Maya authors  
41 tread an often-contradictory path between the vocations of *aj-ts’iib* and *el letrado*. According to  
42 Arias, they ‘position themselves socially and culturally as *letrados* to display and refigure a lexicon  
43 of difference that reimagines colonial legacies as a means for contemporary emancipation’ (2018:  
44 113). At the same time, they ‘break the myth that information, social imaginaries, and learning are  
45 produced exclusively by cosmopolitan *letrados*’ and, in so doing, ‘provincialize cosmopolitan  
46 critics, writers, and academic institutions, challenging the Western-centered knowledge-producing  
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3 machine' (Arias 2017: 4). Worley and Palacios likewise argue that their literature is  
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5 'simultaneously decolonial and yet recognizable according to the very literary constructs whose  
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7 precepts they undermine in their work' (2019: 6), noting how 'this is not a matter of simplistic  
8  
9 binary opposition in which these texts are *ts'iib* or literary but rather a fluid both/and' (2019: 6).

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12 These scholars all make a crucial point that the traditions of *ts'iib* and the *letrado* combine  
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14 in a way that incorporates 'Western' literary conventions while challenging the presumed  
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16 universality of such conventions. Chacón has analysed the dialogic aspect of contemporary Maya  
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18 literature through the lens of the K'iche' Mayan term, *kab'awil* ('double gaze'), or *k'awiil* in  
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20 Yucatec and Classical Mayan, and draws on the interpretations of several Maya philosophers.  
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22 According to Chávez, for example, *kab'awil* denotes a 'doble mirada' of one who 'mira de noche  
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24 y de día; cerca y en el Infinito' (2007 [2001]: 171, nt.1), attributes that are (literally) reflected by  
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26 its pre-Hispanic anthropomorphization as a deity with a mirror on the forehead and that recall  
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28 Worley's insight on the 'double consciousness' of the bilingual writer (2017: 292). In Upún  
29  
30 Sipac's interpretation, *kab'awil* is the expression of the universe in terms of duality, manifesting  
31  
32 as 'el tiempo, el espacio, el movimiento' (1999: 21). As such, *kab'awil* entails an inclusive, holistic  
33  
34 epistemological framework that recognizes the ultimate unity of everything (Chacón 2019: 16), in  
35  
36 a similar way to *ts'iib*, which characterizes not only humans but all of nature (Worley and Palacios  
37  
38 2019: 17).

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41 Chacón convincingly argues that, through 'a *kab'awil* cosmolectics, writers contest and  
42  
43 reconfigure the traditional Latin American literary and cultural model that positions them outside  
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45 the production of literature' (2019: 40–41). Through this practice, she claims, 'contemporary  
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47 Mesoamerican indigenous writers cross an uncertain line that spans the past and present, tradition  
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49 and innovation, oral and written' (2019: 20), while simultaneously engaging in a 'critique of  
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3 assimilationist projects, nation-state history', and other forms of cultural incursion (2019: 20).  
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5 While the concept of *kab'awil* (or *k'awiil*, as I prefer to deploy it in the Lowland context) offers a  
6  
7 powerful framework that accounts for the empowerment of Maya writers to engage in critique of  
8  
9 their own society, Chacón also notes how 'the tension created by attempting to meet the demands  
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11 of their status as "authors," as well as conventional notions of what constitutes indigenous  
12  
13 literature, begs further analysis' (2019: 54).  
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17 A complementary framework is offered by Teuton's concept of the 'textual continuum',  
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19 which proposes that Native American literature emerges from the intersection between oral and  
20  
21 graphic impulses, both of which are mediated by a critical impulse that 'disrupts textual authority  
22  
23 by critiquing dominant texts in new contexts' (Teuton 2010: xviii). In an ideal state, the critical  
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25 impulse enables the other two impulses to complement and balance each other, but 'when either  
26  
27 discourse infringes upon the functions of the other the resulting imbalance can threaten the survival  
28  
29 of the community' (2010: xvii): the graphic impulse risks becoming rigid and authoritarian, or the  
30  
31 oral impulse may become detached, 'mystical dogma' (2010: xvii). In pre- and post-Conquest  
32  
33 Mesoamerica, for example, the 'evolving dependency and privileging of the graphic' (2010: 41)  
34  
35 severely limited possibilities for cultural innovation and, therefore, resilience. Teuton's framework  
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37 fits well with the ambivalent attitude towards writing that, in my interpretation, pervades  
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39 'Serpiente de regio plumaje'.  
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45 Informed by the theoretical insights outlined above, I contend that 'Serpiente de regio  
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47 plumaje' evinces a semantic negotiation between *ts'iib* and the *letrado* which partially  
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49 reinvigorates these categories but also engenders a profound sense of doubt that recalls Cornejo-  
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51 Polar's writings on 'heterogeneity' as a jagged, splintering collision of very different  
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53 epistemologies in the Andean context (2003 [1994]: 10, 14). My analysis reveals another possible  
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3 dimension of *k'awiil* as fractious, incomplete and antagonistic, and which complements rather than  
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5 contradicts the more harmonious interpretations given above. Indeed, the pre-Hispanic  
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7 representation of *k'awiil* also includes fire (Montgomery 2002: 149), a symbol of both destruction  
8  
9 and regeneration. Accordingly, my central argument is that Gómez Navarrete's poem can be read  
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11 as an exploration of what it means to be a Maya writer today, in terms of the antagonistic yet  
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13 mutually constitutive relationship between the categories of *ts'iib* and the *letrado*.  
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### 19 The Feathered Serpent

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24 'K'u'uk'um kaan', or 'Serpiente de regio plumaje', occupies over five pages in each version. It is  
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26 addressed to the mythical Feathered Serpent in the style of a eulogy, and is a veritable cornucopia  
27  
28 of Maya cultural elements: the inseparability of space and time, co-existence of life and death, and  
29  
30 numerous symbolic references to natural and mythical beings, astronomy and ancient cities. On  
31  
32 first reading, these elements might suggest direct continuity with the pre-Hispanic literary  
33  
34 tradition. However, I argue that the picture is far more complicated, as is revealed by a close  
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36 analysis of three segments which, if only a fraction of the total work, typify the epistemic conflict  
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38 that, in my reading, informs the whole poem. We begin with the opening stanza (2003: 18, 26):  
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| 44 | Kaan ti' ajawiil k'u'uk'umel                         | <i>Serpiente de regio plumaje,</i>  |
| 45 |  |                                     |
| 46 | ku yijtal u kúuchil k'amnikte' ti' a bik'chálak jit' | madura en tálamo de vibrátil trenza |
| 47 |  |                                     |
| 48 | le kéeje' ti' óoxlajun p'éeel xóobo'ob u lajkéet     | el venado de trece silbidos su      |
| 49 |  |                                     |
| 50 | k'iin áak'ab   | equinoccio,                         |
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3 ti'e máank'iinal jéesbal ti' u paklam k'iin. en este festín jadeo de tu coito astral<sup>2</sup>.  
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8 The first line (which, in the italicized Spanish version, is also the title of the poem)  
9  
10 references the eponymous creature to whom the entire work is directed. Known as 'K'u'uk'ulkaan'  
11  
12 in Yucatec and 'Quetzalcoatl' in Nahuatl, the Feathered Serpent is of immense cosmological  
13  
14 significance across the whole of Mesoamerica. One of the creator gods in the mythic chronicle of  
15  
16 the *Popol Wuj*<sup>3</sup>, it combines the green plumage of the resplendent quetzal (*Pharomachrus*  
17  
18 *mocinno*) with the blue feathers of the lovely cotinga (*Cotinga amabilis*), symbolizing the  
19  
20 continual emergence of life from the primordial waters of the underworld (see Craveri 2012: 160–  
21  
22 62).  
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26 Snakes were associated with both the phallus and the umbilical chord, and therefore with  
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28 regeneration (Craveri 2012: 161), and served 'as a divine conduit through which priests,  
29  
30 aristocrats, souls, ancestors and deities were transported between the natural world and the  
31  
32 supernatural otherworld of the gods' (McDonald and Stross 2012: 76). Herring, moreover, notes  
33  
34 how the ancient Maya considered 'the striped pattern on the body of a snake' to be a manifestation  
35  
36 of *ts'iib* (2005: 73), and similar patterns can be found on ancient buildings and modern textiles  
37  
38 (Barros de Villar 2016).  
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42 In the context of Gómez Navarrete's literary endeavour, the above associations all support  
43  
44 interpreting the Feathered Serpent as a symbol of *ts'iib*, particularly in the light of the following:  
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50 <sup>2</sup> The published version contains some inconsistencies with regards the established orthography. So as not to beg the  
51  
52 question given the topic of this article, I maintain Gómez Navarrete's spelling in the stanzas, but write the words in  
53  
54 accordance with modern convention in my analysis.

55 <sup>3</sup> More familiar as *Popol Vuh* to speakers of English and Spanish. Colop (2008: 19) offers a sound argument for  
56  
57 spelling it "Wuj" according to modern K'iche' orthography, though both spellings can be found in the Yucatec study  
58  
59 and translation coordinated by Briceño Chel and Reyes Ramírez (2013: 11); Briceño Chel is a native speaker of  
60  
61 Yucatec and a highly respected linguist.

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3 as a multimedia concept of ‘writing’ that includes the natural world, *ts’iib* reflects a  
4  
5 holistic, immersive approach to recording and accessing knowledge that not only  
6  
7 articulates relationships between individuals, communities, and the natural world but also  
8  
9  
10 situates these relationships as repeating cyclically within space and time (Worley and  
11  
12 Palacios 2019: 17).  
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14 One might add that the visual form of Gómez Navarrete’s lengthy poem visually recalls a serpent.  
15  
16 In this reading, the stanza can allude to the process of literary creation, which ‘matures’ (*madura*)  
17  
18 or ‘sprouts’ (*yijtal*) as the words ‘snake’ their way across the page in a ‘vibrátil trenza’ (*bik’chalak*  
19  
20 *jit’*), the latter phrase recalling the association between snakes, textiles and *ts’iib*. At the same time,  
21  
22 the Maya reference to ‘sprouting’ (*yijtal*), most commonly associated with maize, recalls  
23  
24 agriculture as another form of inscription, or *ts’iib*, onto the landscape (Worley and Palacios 2019:  
25  
26 19, 28).  
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31 Continuing this interpretation, the references to reproduction can indicate the process of  
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33 literary genesis: *tálamu* (*kúuchil k’amnikte’*), *coito* (*paklam*), and even the *venado* (*kéej*) which,  
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35 in contrast to the ‘thalamus’ (associated with the female part of the flower), symbolizes the sun  
36  
37 (Montolú 1976: 150) and, by extension, male sexuality. Wildernaín Villegas Carrillo, Gómez  
38  
39 Navarrete’s student and a renowned poet in his own right, told me how deer<sup>4</sup> whistle during the  
40  
41 rutting season (*báaxal kéej*, or ‘deer play’), and when fleeing from hunters<sup>5</sup>. The whistling of the  
42  
43 deer, therefore, signals both the beginning and end of life, just as, in the same conversation,  
44  
45 Villegas Carrillo explained how the snake symbolizes regeneration by shedding and re-growing  
46  
47 its skin (a form of constant re-inscription).  
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55 <sup>4</sup> The Yucatan white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus yucatanensis*).

56 <sup>5</sup> Conversation with Villegas Carrillo, 12 August 2016.  
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3 The number 13, auspicious in Maya philosophy, denotes the stages of the sun's celestial  
4 journey before 'dying' at dusk. At the same time, the equinox indicates the equal presence of light  
5 and darkness, life and death, while the deer is also the name of a lunar month in the Maya calendar.  
6  
7 Together, all of these meanings indicate the confluence of complementary elements out of which  
8 life constantly emerges and to which it ultimately returns, as is structurally conveyed by the  
9 parallelism between *k'iin* (day) and *áak'ab* (night) in the third line. These allusions to cyclicality,  
10 complementarity and reproduction can again be interpreted as the process of literary creation, seen  
11 from the perspective of *ts'iib* as 'a dialogue of different modalities that does not privilege one over  
12 another and that sees the processes of storing and producing knowledge as fluid, collective, and  
13 cyclic' (Worley and Palacios 2019: 21).  
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26 The allusions to darkness nonetheless hint at a destructive element that becomes more  
27 obvious later in the poem, and that can be read in terms of the uneasy relationship between *ts'iib*  
28 and the *letrado*. On this point, it is noteworthy that the plethora of archaic terms and absence of  
29 Spanish words in the Maya version mark a wide gulf from the contemporary vernacular, even  
30 rendering it incomprehensible to most native speakers (similar conclusions can be drawn from the  
31 Spanish version). This could be interpreted as a continuation of the cryptic *áak'ab ts'iib* ('night  
32 writing') or *su'uy wa' t'aan* ('entangled language'<sup>6</sup>) that characterized colonial texts such as the  
33 *Chilam Balam* as an attempt to restrict knowledge of mystical secrets. From this standpoint, the  
34 style could imply a decolonial act of cultural preservation.  
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47 On the other hand, a prevailing attitude among contemporary Maya literati is that the *xáak' maaya*  
48 ('mixed Maya') of most native speakers is 'polluted, degenerate and of inferior value' (Gabbert  
49 2001: 479), compared to the linguistically 'pure' *jach maaya* ('real Maya') of intellectuals. By  
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56 <sup>6</sup> Spelled *Zuyua* in the colonial texts.  
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3 way of contrast, Hanks' historical study demonstrates that even *jach maaya* 'is the product of  
4 *reducción*' by missionaries, 'which means it is not exclusively "Maya", emphatically not in any  
5 precolonial sense' (Hanks 2010: 374n1). The point here is not to infer Gómez Navarrete's  
6 ideological position regarding linguistic purism, or to make judgement on either perspective, but  
7 to note the resemblance between his poetic style and the formal, archaic code deployed by *letrados*.  
8 An argument can therefore be made that, while Gómez Navarrete deconstructs some of the *letrado*  
9 tradition's authority by assimilating it (partially) into *ts'uib*, in other ways the tradition is reinforced  
10 by this combination. Indeed, while *ts'uib* is a more inclusive paradigm in many ways, its glyphic  
11 manifestation was a strong marker of power and status, as was alphabetic writing for *letrados*.  
12 Similarly, the poem's eulogistic genre recalls the ostentation of the *letrado* tradition as well as the  
13 glorification of powerful dynasties inscribed on Maya monuments.

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Given these historical contexts, it is hard not to read the status of the colonial *escribano* or the purism of most contemporary Maya literature as an inheritance of both traditions. The different manifestations of *ts'uib* – open and inclusive or, like the *letrado* paradigm, socially restricted – can be interpreted through Teuton's notion of the 'textual continuum', namely the extent to which the 'graphic impulse' facilitates or limits cultural innovation, depending on its degree of integration with other cultural forms (2010: xvii). This, in turn, goes a long way to explaining Gómez Navarrete's ambivalence regarding his literary vocation, as is evident throughout the poem. Indeed, later on he describes the Feathered Serpent in the following terms: 'Polisémica síntesis envuelves, posees, doblegas' (Gómez Navarrete 2003: 30). This line can be interpreted as the possibilities for either innovation (polisémica) or constraint (posees) that are afforded when two traditions assimilate (envuelves) and/or transform (doblegas).

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3 Inscribing the Self  
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8 In the third stanza (Spanish version), or the final lines of the long second stanza (Maya version),  
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10 the poetic subject makes a direct entreaty to the Feathered Serpent (Gómez Navarrete 2003: 18,  
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12 26):  
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| 17 Ts'íibteen tu chi' ch'uyub pukak'       | Dibújame en la boca de un incensario         |
| 18 yéetel u jejeláasil kuxtal ja'ilo'ob:   | con diversidad de líquidos vitales:          |
| 19 u xexbail Xuux Eek',                    | flujo vaginal de Venus matutino,             |
| 20 pom ti' u t'olent'ol in ts'o'omel,      | copal de mis circunvoluciones cerebrales,    |
| 21 K'aaj ku pu'uk'paja tu jeelpajal nenus. | hiel que se enturbia en su cristal versátil. |
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31 The first line explicitly mentions *ts'íib*, whose rendering in Spanish (dibujar) reveals the  
32 multidimensionality of this concept and thereby locates Gómez Navarrete's 'writing' within Maya  
33 rather than 'Western' parameters, at least on first reading. The fact, moreover, that the Feathered  
34 Serpent is appealed to as an agent of writing strengthens the interpretation of this mythical being  
35 as a symbol of Gómez Navarrete's literary endeavour. The reference to 'incensario' (ch'uyub  
36 pukak') could indicate Maya sacred rituals, but equally the ceremonies of the Catholic church. In  
37 both traditions, incense is an agent of spiritual cleansing, yet it also has funerary connotations.  
38 That the poetic subject is 'written' on an incense burner is therefore ambiguous, hinting at the  
39 uncertain role that writing has for his destiny. Such ambiguity recalls portrayals of *k'awiil* on  
40 incense burners found in the Classical Maya city of Palenque, and which depicted the integration  
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3 of 'two opposite and complementary halves of a larger idea' (de la Garza Camino and Cuevas  
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5 García 2005: 99). In the stanza, by contrast, doubt and uncertainty are more salient themes.  
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8           The reference to diverse 'líquidos vitales' (kuxtal ja'ilo'ob), for example, at first suggests  
9  
10 that writing gives life, yet the kind of liquids involved (the vaginal fluids of Venus, copal, and bile)  
11  
12 reinforces the sense of ambiguity. The allusion to Venus (Xuux Eek') especially invites multiple  
13  
14 interpretations. The calculation of the planet's synodic cycle is a major theme of the Postclassic  
15  
16 Dresden Codex (Aldana 2016), while the colonial-era *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* describes it as  
17  
18 the 'guide' or 'conjurer' (*aj-paay*) of the sun (Knowlton 2010: 67–70), given the planet's  
19  
20 appearance at dawn and dusk. The morning manifestation of Venus in the poem may suggest hope  
21  
22 for renewal, yet in Maya cosmology the planet 'is neither a model of good behavior nor of physical  
23  
24 perfection' (Milbrath 1999: 34), and a 'number of folktales describe Venus as ugly or lazy' (1999:  
25  
26 34). Given the intercultural nature of Gómez Navarrete's work, as Aguilar Gil (2015) notes for  
27  
28 contemporary indigenous literature in general, the Roman connotations of romantic love cannot  
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30 be discounted, either.  
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35           There are various terms for this planet in Maya, which 'reflect the planet's multiple aspects'  
36  
37 and 'personalities related to different seasonal cycles' (1999: 36). The name chosen by Gómez  
38  
39 Navarrete is 'Xuux Eek'', literally 'wasp star', with *xuux* denoting the parasitic species, *Polybia*  
40  
41 *occidentalis* (Pinkus-Rendón 2012: 1708) whose females have a sharp sting. The term, *eek'* is  
42  
43 equally ambivalent, denoting both 'star' and 'darkness'. If, as I have argued, the Feathered Serpent  
44  
45 can be interpreted as a trope for the process of literary creation, the mixture of romantic love  
46  
47 (Venus) and predation (Xuux Eek') can indicate the conflictive nature of writing as located in the  
48  
49 tension between the traditions of *ts'ib* and the *letrado*, and oscillating between the inclusive and  
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3 restrictive dimensions of the former. The poetic subject is, after all, *written* in the ‘flujo vaginal’  
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5 (xexbail) of Xuux Eek’.

6  
7 Venus also has a cosmological association with the Feathered Serpent, which symbolized  
8  
9 the planet for both the Aztecs and the Postclassic Maya (Milbrath 1999: 35–36). In the Yucatan,  
10  
11 Venus is also called ‘Kaan Eek’’, or ‘snake star’ (1999: 35), the name adopted by Jacinto Canek,  
12  
13 who, in 1761, led a rebellion against the slave-like conditions in which much of the Maya  
14  
15 population lived (Arias 2018: 45). While Canek was ultimately defeated and executed, the uprising  
16  
17 set an important precedent for the so-called Caste Wars, a far more long-lasting rebellion the  
18  
19 following century in which literacy played a key role, as noted earlier.

20  
21 Like the Aztec version of the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, Canek has become a symbol  
22  
23 of a messianic belief in the return of ‘a liberator figure’ (2018: 46), who, in the Caste Wars, was  
24  
25 incarnated by Cecilio Chi’, the eponymous hero of Gómez Navarrete’s bilingual novel. In this  
26  
27 foundational work, Chi’ learns the art of war from ‘the fighting strategies of the jaguar and the  
28  
29 rattlesnake’ (2018: 101), while the Feathered Serpent symbolizes the Milky Way, ‘the umbilical  
30  
31 cord that carries the cosmic fluids to all the people on Earth’ (2018: 106). These reflections relate  
32  
33 to another dimension of Venus as a symbol of war (Milbrath 1999: 34) and, by extension,  
34  
35 resistance. That the poetic subject entreats the Feathered Serpent to write his own existence in the  
36  
37 vaginal fluid of Venus can therefore be read as emancipation through *ts’iib*, or, alternatively, the  
38  
39 ‘poison pen’ of cultural domination perpetuated by the *letrado* tradition.

40  
41 The phrase, ‘circunvoluciones cerebrales’ (t’olent’ol in ts’o’omel) can likewise be  
42  
43 interpreted as the process of literary creation. At the same time, it also suggests obsession, which  
44  
45 concords with the sense of limitation indicated by the Maya, ‘t’olent’ol’, literally ‘cosa surcada’  
46  
47 (Barrera Vásquez 1980: 840). Reading between the lines, and languages, the two phrases suggest  
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3 ambivalence about the capacity of literature to liberate self and society. Perhaps there is a subtle  
4 allusion to the rigidity of a 'letrado' version of written Maya (*jach maaya*), in contrast to the  
5 dynamism of the spoken language, implying an imbalance between the 'graphic' and 'oral'  
6 impulses (Teuton 2010: xvii). Here, the agent used for writing is the resin of the copal tree (*Protium*  
7 *copal*) or *poom*, widely used as incense. In addition to the ambiguity of this substance, as noted  
8 above, copal wood can be used to mark field boundaries, which, from a 'Western' perspective,  
9 may suggest the limitation of creativity, while from a Maya standpoint, straight lines and clear  
10 demarcations constitute an ethical and aesthetic ideal (Taube 2003: 465).

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22 The final line confirms the dark undertones, for the liquid is no longer sacred copal resin  
23 but bile (hiel), rendered *k'aaj* (bitterness) in Maya, which, moreover, 'enturbia' (pu'uk'pajal). The  
24 reference to the 'cristal versátil' (nenu) invites several interpretations. In 'Western' lore, crystals  
25 are instruments of divination, while the Maya term, *nenu* derives from *néen* (mirror), which, as  
26 well as the obvious association with self-scrutiny, has long been considered a means of accessing  
27 sacred knowledge in the Maya world (Brady and Ashmore 1999: 137). The crystal's murkiness  
28 recalls the *Popol Wuj*, where the gods cloud the sight of the first humans like 'breath upon the face  
29 of a mirror' (Christenson 2007 [2003]: 201). These associations imply that, in a context of the  
30 'double gaze' (Chacón) between a vocation as *aj-ts'ib* or *letrado*, it becomes impossible for  
31 Gómez Navarrete to gain a clear perception of his role as a contemporary Maya writer.

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45 The adjective, 'versátil', moreover, suggests 'verso', and exists in a rather oxymoronic  
46 relationship to 'cristal', the one suggesting dynamism and fluidity, the other fixity and stasis. While  
47 the co-existence of *ts'ib* and the *letrado* as literary standards makes for a diverse context of poetic  
48 production, the suggestion is that the contradictions lock the subject in a prison (and prism) of  
49 uncertainty. At the same time, Barrera Vásquez et al. also define 'nenu' as 'daisy' (1980: 565),  
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3 which, given the Maya association between flowers and female sexuality, dialogues with the  
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5 earlier reference to Venus and perhaps indicates hope for regeneration, something that is also  
6  
7 conveyed by the Maya verb, *jéelpajal* (to change, transform). In this reading, the stanza could  
8  
9 constitute a reference to the life process: birth (morning star), the activities of life (mental  
10  
11 processes), death (bitterness) and rebirth (crystal or daisy). From this perspective, the stanza would  
12  
13 be a manifestation of *ts'íib* in its cyclical understanding of time and the intermeshing of personal  
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15 and cosmic histories (Worley and Palacios 2019: 69-70, 73), while anticipating a resolution of the  
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17 poet's conflict about his literary identity.  
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### 24 The Sybarite Dance

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28 The last extract comes from halfway through the poem, following many lines that eulogize the  
29  
30 Feathered Serpent by recourse to diverse symbolic elements. The stanza is particularly interesting  
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32 in its combination of European and Mesoamerican references (Gómez Navarrete 2003: 20, 28):  
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|----|---|--|
| 37 | P'éelel ku t'ajkubaj ti' buk'tun ti' jats'uts t'aano'ob | Número que se alambica en pedestal de    |
| 38 | woj ts'íibta'an ti' kulkinaj túukul ti' ch'ench'enki,   | tropos,                                  |
| 39 |   |  |
| 40 | babak' ku ch'a'b u k'ak'atak bej ti'in ma' xulumte'     | letra engarzada en catarsis de silencio, |
| 41 |   |  |
| 42 | k'áat chi',   | espiral que se orbita en mi pregunta     |
| 43 |   |  |
| 44 | ¿Je'e u páajtal in káanbal ti'e moson iik' u ayik'al    | eterna,                                  |
| 45 |   |  |
| 46 | yóok'ot?  | ¿puedo aprender del tornado la danza     |
| 47 |   |  |
| 48 |   | sibarita?                                |
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3           These lines describe various attributes of the Feathered Serpent. The ‘number’ (p’éelel)  
4 alludes to the mathematical achievements of the ancient Maya and, by extension, to cyclical time  
5 as symbolized by the Feathered Serpent. By contrast, the Greek term in the phrase, ‘pedestal de  
6 tropos’ evokes Classical European civilization and hints at the social elevation of the *letrados* since  
7 colonial times, but also recalls the *su’uy wa’ t’aan* (‘entangled language’) of Maya sacred  
8 documents, as described earlier. Indeed, the pedestal is an important feature of Maya architecture,  
9 and its glyphic representation marks the day signs of the tzolkin calendar. The association between  
10 ‘numbers’ and ‘tropes’, moreover, dismantles the ‘Western’ distinction between mathematics and  
11 writing, science and literature, reminding the reader that mathematical inscriptions are a major  
12 component of Maya hieroglyphic script, and therefore *ts’iib*, in contrast to the more restricted focus  
13 on the ‘letter’ in Eurocentric literary practices.  
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28           Some ambiguity emerges in the second line, where the number is described as ‘wo’oj’  
29 (glyph) in the Maya version, and ‘letra’ in the Spanish. This could be interpreted as an effort to  
30 bring the *letrado* tradition into the fold of *ts’iib*, thereby widening the focus of the former and  
31 reclaiming the alphabetic script as a means of cultural emancipation rather than domination.  
32 Likewise, the rendering of the verb, *ts’iib* (in its continuous form, ‘ts’iibta’an’) as ‘engarzada’  
33 rather than ‘escrita’ may suggest a positioning within the Maya cultural framework, and again  
34 recalls the ‘entangled language’ of colonial-era documents.  
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45           At the same time, while the European notion of ‘writing’ was narrower than *ts’iib* at the  
46 conceptual level, in practice it was often interwoven with other artistic forms: ‘El discurso barroco  
47 no se limita a las palabras, sino que las integra con los emblemas, jeroglíficos, empresas, apólogos,  
48 cifras, e inserta este anunciado complejo dentro de un despliegue teatral que apela a la pintura, la  
49 escultura, la música, los bailes, los colores’ (Rama 1998 [1984]: 38). This description could  
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3 equally fit the cultural expression of the ancient Maya. While, for Rama, this multidimensional  
4 spectacle (which he similarly calls a ‘tropología’, 1998 [1984]: 38) is most striking in the ‘arcos  
5 triunfales con que se conmemoraban los grandes acontecimientos’ (1998 [1984]: 38), in ancient  
6  
7 Maya art it is manifest on the monoliths and panels that were, likewise, erected as testament to key  
8 political events. From this standpoint, the ‘regio plumaje’ (ajawil k’u’uk’umel) can also be  
9  
10 interpreted as a reference to the ceremony that surrounded rulership: in both the Maya and  
11 European contexts, monarchy was predicated on the divine right to rule, and its mysterious power  
12 emanated, in large part, from possession of the written word.  
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22 If the conflation of glyph and letter could be interpreted as the emancipation of alphabetic  
23 writing within *ts’iib*, it can equally be read as the framing of the autochthonous Maya script within  
24 European categories, and the profound influence of the *letrado* tradition on contemporary Maya  
25 literature. Indeed, the adjective, ‘engarzada’ also suggests confusion, recalling the verb, ‘enturbiar’  
26 in the previous extract; likewise, the Maya, ‘kulkiinaj tuukul’ (sedentary thoughts) implies  
27 paralysis, evoking the crystal in that same stanza. The verb, ‘alambica’ is equally ambivalent,  
28 indicating needless complication but also a sense of reduction, while the Maya, ‘t’ajjubaj’ can be  
29 interpreted either as a derivation of the adjective, *t’a’aj* (brave, industrious, agile) (Barrera  
30 Vásquez 1980: 831), or as the reflexive form of the verb, ‘to drip’ (t’aj), hinting at proliferation  
31 but also dissipation while also recalling the sinuous form of hieroglyphic inscriptions. In this  
32 respect, poetry is the genre of ‘Western’ literature that most resembles pre-Hispanic writing.  
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47 Given the poem’s ambivalence towards writing, the phrase, ‘pedestal de tropos’ could  
48 equally be read as a criticism of false edification, hubris and even arrogance. The Maya phrase,  
49 ‘jats’uts t’aano’ob’ (pretty words) suggests a degree of irony that annuls the pomp and  
50 circumstance of its Spanish counterpart, ‘tropos’. The indications of a veiled attack at literary  
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3 creation – one which is necessarily self-directed – become stronger in the reference to ‘silencio’  
4 (ch’ench’enkil). While this could imply calm, and perhaps wisdom, it also suggests muteness,  
5  
6 recalling Teuton’s association between writing and absence, in contrast to the presence of the  
7  
8 spoken word (2010: 32). Pitarch’s ethnographic findings among the Tzeltal Mayas support this  
9  
10 interpretation: ‘Los signos de la piel del jaguar se definen en tzeltal como su pintura o  
11  
12 escritura...Pero la escritura, como el jaguar mismo, procede del ‘otro lado’, esto es, del mundo de  
13  
14 la muerte...La escritura es la necrosis del lenguaje’ (2013: 60). Like the snake, the jaguar has  
15  
16 celestial connotations in Maya philosophy, its spots symbolizing ‘the stars of the night sky’  
17  
18 (Milbrath 1999: 120); both creatures embody the intertwining of *ts’ib* and cosmic cycles. Pitarch  
19  
20 ’s observations are remarkably similar to Rama’s statement that ‘la *escritura* de los letrados es una  
21  
22 sepultura donde es inmovilizada, fijada y detenida para siempre la producción oral’ (1998 [1984]:  
23  
24 71).

25  
26 From this standpoint, ‘silencio’ could indicate death as spoken language becomes  
27  
28 crystalized in writing<sup>7</sup>, while ‘catharsis’, another Greek term, hints at the self-defeating battle  
29  
30 between the paradigms of *ts’ib* and the *letrado*. Yet catharsis is also a process of purification and  
31  
32 rebirth, evoking the cyclical notion of time in Maya philosophy and the therapeutic nature of  
33  
34 literary creation as a means of self-discovery, as well as the transformation that both paradigms  
35  
36 undergo through their partial assimilation. In this reading, the rhetorical question raised in the  
37  
38 stanza’s final line concerns Gómez Navarrete’s own poetic vocation. The question is rather  
39  
40 paradoxical, considering that his literary pursuits are both the object of his uncertainty and the  
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42 means through which he aims to resolve it. That the question is ‘eterna’ or ‘never ending’ (ma’  
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55 <sup>7</sup> The Maya writer, Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech offered a similar interpretation of writing when I conversed with him  
56 in 2016 (Pigott 2020: 225).  
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3 xulu'unte') shows that it is ultimately unanswerable, just as it is impossible for the author to claim  
4  
5 greater allegiance to one tradition or the other.  
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8 The Spanish phrase, 'danza sibarita' is equally paradoxical. In one interpretation, it can be  
9  
10 read as an allusion to ancient Maya rituals, in which dance played a major role (see Looper 2009).  
11  
12 From another perspective, the reference to European antiquity may suggest an allegiance with the  
13  
14 *letrado* tradition, yet its formulation as a question conveys doubt about the author's identification  
15  
16 with that tradition. By referencing an ancient city famed for wealth and luxury, the 'Sybarite dance'  
17  
18 may also allude to the privilege enjoyed historically by the 'grupo letrado' or, indeed, ancient  
19  
20 Maya rulers, an interpretation that is strengthened by the Maya, 'ayik'al yóok'ot' (dance of the  
21  
22 rich); in this reading, the phrase conveys a bitter irony considering the lack of publishing outlets  
23  
24 for writers in indigenous languages. From this perspective, the 'dance' could be an expression of  
25  
26 pretence and posturing in a similar way to the 'pedestal de tropos', at the same time as it  
27  
28 foregrounds authorial continuity with pre-Hispanic traditions.  
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33  
34 It is also relevant that the ancient city of Sybaris was destroyed and rebuilt several times,  
35  
36 which perhaps hints at the same rebellious element found in Gómez Navarrete's novel, as well as  
37  
38 the destructive force of the 'Conquest' which, like a 'tornado' or 'moson iik'' (whirling wind),  
39  
40 wrought wholesale havoc on ancient Mesoamerica. The *letrado* tradition was, as Rama makes  
41  
42 clear, a key instrument of this destruction. Yet dancing and whirlwinds both entail the capacity to  
43  
44 change form while maintaining the same identity and, just as the serpent is both deadly and a  
45  
46 symbol of regeneration, the allusion to these elements may indicate the ability of writers, and  
47  
48 literary traditions, to reinvent themselves as energies become liberated through the demolition of  
49  
50 previous structures. Indeed, Shrimpton Masson (2019) has demonstrated how oral histories about  
51  
52 hurricanes create new networks of identity that crisscross the Yucatan Peninsula. Worley and  
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Palacios, moreover, note how dancing can also be described as *ts'uib* (2019: 81), while the Maya term, *iik'* (in 'moson iik') denotes not only 'wind' but also 'life-giving breath', as reflected in one of the terms for 'poetry', *iik'il t'aan* ('language of the breath').

The phrase, 'k'ak'atak bej' can be interpreted in two main ways. On the one hand, *k'ak'atak* means, 'ovalado, elíptico, cuadrilongo, o anguloso' (Barrera Vásquez 1980: 366), while the related noun, *k'ak'at* denotes 'cosa angulosa, plana redonda, cosa atravesada o puesta al través' (1980: 366) and the verb, *k'aak'ataj* means 'atravesar sin orden estorbando el paso' (1980: 366). The word, *bej* means 'path', and recalls Uc Be's association between writing and walking as forms of *ts'uib*, or 'inscription', onto the physical and social landscape (2016). However, the description of the path as 'k'ak'atak' contradicts the Maya ideal of straightness mentioned earlier. Indeed, the *sak bej* (white roads) of the ancient Maya were, like the Roman *viae*, paragons of geometrical precision. The angular, twisting form of the path can be interpreted as disorientation resulting from the author's entanglement between different literary paradigms that are only partially reconcilable. This results in the second meaning of 'k'ak'atak', namely, as a reduplication of the verb, *k'áat* (to question, ask), which also occurs at the end of the line as the noun, 'k'áat chi'' (question). In Maya, reduplication has an emphatic function; thus, both readings foreground doubt and uncertainty as the poet treads a tortuous path between the cultural edifices of *ts'uib* and the *letrado*.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have offered one interpretation of Gómez Navarrete's bilingual poem based on a hermeneutic and linguistic analysis of three key extracts. My argument was that 'Serpiente de regio plumaje' can be read as an exploration of the process of literary creation, in the light (or darkness)

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3 of two cultural schemata: *ts'ib* and the *letrado*. Their combination is an uncertain one: where the  
4 holistic, inclusive dimension of *ts'ib* is emphasized, it can render the *letrado* paradigm more  
5 flexible; where its historical association with power and hegemony is accentuated, *ts'ib* can  
6 reinforce these same tendencies in the latter. While there are significant overlaps, the two  
7 paradigms ultimately involve different ideals and expectations about what literature is, and how it  
8 should be produced and received. Through the twisting, mellifluous ambivalence of the Feathered  
9 Serpent, Gómez Navarrete resuscitates a creature of ancient myths and, through a kind of lyrical  
10 alchemy, transforms it into a symbol of the uneasy dance that contemporary Maya writers perform  
11 in an effort to find their real vocation between the shifting coils of two literary ideals.  
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24 Gómez Navarrete's combined, yet partial, allegiance to both traditions was evidenced by  
25 the following key examples, among others: the snake as a symbol of *ts'ib*, yet also of the conflict  
26 with the *letrado* tradition; the elaborate language which recalled cryptic Maya verse but equally  
27 the archaic code of the *letrados*; the ambivalent allusions to romance and 'vital fluids'; the 'cristal  
28 versátil' (nenus) as an instrument of self-knowledge which was nonetheless murky; the association  
29 between glyphs, numbers and letters; the allusion to silence and, by extension, death, but also to  
30 rebirth; the multiple meanings of the 'danza sibarita', the 'pedestal de tropos', and the winding  
31 path of many questions. With each line, old certainties are disentangled and rewoven into new  
32 doubts, as the threads of two traditions meet and interlock, snake-like, in a duel that, far from  
33 unleashing the supremacy of one, constantly transforms them both.  
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