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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE (/GENRE/TRANSLATORS-NOTE)

Translating Ch'ol: A Bridge Between Linguistics and Poetry

by Carol Rose Little ([/author/carol-rose-little](https://my.worldlit.org/author/carol-rose-little)) and Charlotte Friedman ([/author/charlotte-friedman](https://my.worldlit.org/author/charlotte-friedman))



View from the poet's roof, Tumbalá, Chiapas / Photo by Carol Rose Little

TO VIST THE Ch'ol poet Juana Peñate Montejo's house in Chiapas, Mexico, requires several flights, at least three van rides, and hitching a ride on a co-op pickup truck that winds its way up an unpaved road to the town of Tumbalá. Coffee and corn fields pepper the valley below. If you ask for directions to the "poet's house," anyone will be able to tell you. Peñate is well known in the community and in Chiapas, since she won the Premio de Literaturas Indígenas in 2020 for her collection of Ch'ol poems, *Isoñil Ja'al* (Dance of the rain). Ch'ol is a living Mayan language spoken by a quarter of a million

people in southern Mexico as well as diasporic communities across North America. The Mesoamerican Mayan language family, with speakers of over seven million, comprises about thirty languages, each with its own locality and cultural traditions. They are as distinct from one another as English is from German.

In Peñate's poetry, the body-self is engaged with, and affected by, the landscape, the weather, and the spirits. Tones shift from declaration to plea, tentative to self-assured. The territory, internal and external, is vast. Peñate constructs and claims spaces in the world, as a poet and a woman. As translators of her poetry, we dwelled in these image-rich places and worked to re-create them in English, so more readers might do the same.

Peñate self-translates her poetry into Spanish, and her three books are printed in both languages. Our project—a collaboration between a linguist, who specializes in and speaks Ch'ol, and a poet who, when she translates, does so from Italian—was, for the first time, to translate Peñate's poetry from the original Ch'ol. Audibly intriguing, the language's soft *m*'s and *n*'s are punctuated by staccatos of *k*', *ch*', and *ts*'. It is impossible to replicate the sounds of Peñate's poetry in English (or in Spanish), and yet we thought it possible to convey in English the lush imagery; tensions of history and modernity, Mayan and Mexican; and near prayer-like feeling of many of her poems.

Translation in any language is, of course, never a matter of simple word replacement, but, in this case, a comparable conceptual framework didn't exist. In contrast to English, a Ch'ol word may be made up of many small parts or morphemes. For example, in "I Am the Alphabet," the single word *sākjamtyäleloñ* can be broken down as *sāk*, bright; *jam*, open; *tyälel*, indicating a process (usually marked with -ing in English); and *oñ*, first-person subject. The literal translation of the word is "I am the bright opening" and, in the context of the poem, "bright light of morning."

In the Ch'ol language, a word may indicate emphasis because of additions to its root, such as *ñäch'äkña* in "When I Wake," literally, "It is quiet." The root *ñäch*, "quiet," morphs to an adjective by repeating the vowel *ä* and adding *kña* and points to an intensification that we built on in the poem. *Ñäch* appears again as *ñäch'tyälel*. The suffix, *tyälel*, animates the root word to convey a state of quiet. Our translation, "I hear nothing," may seem a radical shift and yet not in the poem as a whole.

Frames of reference differ depending on cultural context, and our hope is that, in the translation of Peñate's poetry, some of these are exposed and considered. In a series of poems about migrants, which includes "When I Wake," we could not help but be aware that Peñate writes from the perspective of an Indigenous woman in southern Mexico, and that our views are shaped by our own geographies and citizenry. But riding the waves of Peñate's shifting voice, we found ourselves suddenly gifted with a sort of kaleidoscopic vision, in which imagined experiences included those of the one writing, the one reading, and the one traveling north.

Editorial note: Read translations of three of Peñate's poems (/node/5522) from this same issue.



Carol Rose Little is an assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Oklahoma. She has been working with Ch'ol communities in Chiapas, Mexico, since 2015 and holds a PhD in linguistics from Cornell University.



Charlotte Friedman is a poet, author (*The Girl Pages*), and adjunct professor at Barnard College, Columbia University. Her poetry has been published in such journals as the *Connecticut River Review*, *Intima*, and *Waterwheel Review*.

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Peñate Montejo, Juana. 2022. Three Poems from Chiapas, translated from Ch'ol by Carol Rose Little and Charlotte Friedman. *World Literature Today* 96(2). 32. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

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Three Poems from Chiapas

by Juana Peñate Montejo ([/author/juana-penate-montejo](#))

translated by Carol Rose Little ([/translator/carol-rose-little](#)) and Charlotte Friedman ([/translator/charlotte-friedman](#))




Ch'ol embroidered shirts / Photo by Diana Laura Montejo

I Am the Alphabet

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

Tsolts'ijboñ

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

 worldlittoday - Tsolts'ijboñ (Ch'ol version "I Am the Alphabet")

 SOUNDCLOUD

worldlittoday (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday>) · Tsolts'ijboñ (Ch'ol version "I Am the Alphabet") (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday/tsoltsijbon-chol-version-i-am>)

Soy alfabeto

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

 worldlittoday - Soy Alfabeto (Spanish version of "I Am the Alphabet")

 SOUNDCLOUD

worldlittoday (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday>) · Soy Alfabeto (Spanish version of "I Am the Alphabet") (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday/soy-alfabeto-spanish-version>)

This Land, Your World

The candle sits undisturbed,
smoldering pine in the air,
and a memory of you travels through time.
It is your presence in my song, *chuchu'*.*

Jiñäch ili lum apañumil

Ma'añik ñijkäbil ixuch'il ñichim
Lotyol icha'añ ixojokñäyel jiñi pom
Jiñi lum apañumiläch
Aña'tyãntyel añ tyi tyamlel
Awajñibäch tyi jk'ay, kchuchu'.

 worldlittoday - Pañumil (Ch'ol version of "This Land, Your World")

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worldlittoday (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday>) · Pañumil (Ch'ol version of "This Land, Your World") (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday/pan-umil-chol-version-of-this>)

Es la tierra tu universo

Es la cera de las velas intactas
Aguarda el aroma del incienso
Es la tierra tu universo
Es tu memoria en el tiempo
Es tu presencia en mi canto, *chuchu'*.

 worldlittoday - Universo (Spanish version of "This Land, Your World")

 SOUNDCLOUD


worldlittoday (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday>) · Universo (Spanish version of "This Land, Your World") (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday/universo-spanish-version-of>)

When I Wake

It is quiet
in the annona tree,
twisted and hollow,
roots grown deep into the rock.
Morning, and I hear nothing.

Itye'el k'äk'ats

Ñäch'äkña tsa' kubi che' tsa' kajñi kwuty,
ya' tyi iñoxi' itye'el k'äk'ats,
käläx ñoxix kome weñ lochityikix,
iwi' tsa'ix iñusa iye'bal xajlel tyi jaybä lum,
ili säk'ajel, jiñi ñäch'tyällel mi ik'otyel tyi ipächälel kchikiñ.

 worldlittoday - Itye'el (Ch'ol version of "When I Wake")

 SOUNDCLOUD

worldlittoday (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday>) · Itye'el (Ch'ol version of "When I Wake") (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday/ityeel-chol-version-of-when-i>)

Árbol de anona

Me desperté con la ausencia de sonidos
en ese viejo árbol de anona,
está tan viejo que sus arrugas se notan,
sus raíces han cruzado los pedregales de la delgada tierra,
pero esta mañana, es un silencio que cala la epidermis de mis oídos.

 worldlittoday - Árbol De Anona (Spanish version of "When I Wake")

 SOUNDCLOUD

worldlittoday (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday>) · Árbol De Anona (Spanish version of "When I Wake") (<https://soundcloud.com/worldlittoday/a-rbol-de-anona-spanish>)

Translations from the Ch'ol

Editorial note: The first two poems are from *Ipusik'al Matye'lum / Corazón de Selva* (Pluralia, 2013). "When I Wake" is from *Isoñil Ja'al / Danza de la Lluvia*. "Chuchu" means "grandmother."

Read a Translator's Note (/node/5511) by Little & Friedman from this same issue.



Juana Peñate Montejo is a Ch'ol poet and writer from Tumbalá, Chiapas, Mexico. She has authored several books of poetry in Ch'ol with self-translations in Spanish, including *Ipusik'al Matye'lum / Corazón de la Selva* (Pluralia) and, most recently, *Isoñil Ja'al / Danza de la Lluvia*, which won the 2020 Premio de Literaturas Indígenas de América.



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