



## The legible jaguar

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## THE LEGIBLE JAGUAR

**Adugo biri**

Clothing? A page of text? A tally? These questions were prompted by a first sight of the Bororo jaguar skin prominently displayed at the Mostra 500 Anos in São Paulo in 2000. For the wearer of it, the pelt would be the outer skin, head uppermost, with the inside finely inscribed in red and black matching the ribs to either hand, inverting left and right for the viewer, and rounding the smooth flat surface like a scroll.

This striking artefact had been brought from Vienna for the occasion, having been taken there from Brazil by Johannes Natterer. In the early nineteenth century, Natterer travelled throughout Amazonia as a naturalist and ethnographer; his notions of vertebrate life anticipated those of Darwin and Wallace. The latter acknowledged having inherited from him the professional skinner he employed to prepare his specimens ('Natterer's hunter Luiz'). Similar skins were soon discovered to have ended up in Europe; one of comparable date is in Berlin.

The *Enciclopédia Bororo* (1962–76) revealed that these artefacts were to be identified as 'Adugo biri', that is, jaguar skins prepared to mourn someone eaten by that feline (adugo) whose painted designs (biri) can be synonymous with the very idea of writing and representation. Ordered alphabetically, the *Enciclopédia* devotes many pages to Adugo biri (entries under later letters diminish sharply as native input declined, a sad story in itself). It describes the ritual preparation in great detail and copiously illustrates the textual designs by genre and theme. Thanks to this, the design of the Natterer skin can be known to derive from the face paintings of the sky spirits, specifically the Kogaekogae, who first revealed the names of the constellations as they rise in turn over the eastern horizon. These thematic motifs are further dealt with in separate entries and they match those in Bororo stories gathered in other volumes, notably of the jaguar as progenitor and 'speaker' (onça falador), and the ceaseless battle he wages, as leader of the constellations, against the sun-moon (Meri-doge). Periodicities in these lives of the jaguar, terrestrial in his seventh cave and celestial as leader of 11, were quickly found to correspond to unit counts precisely registered on the skins.

In this, Natterer's Adugo biri could be seen as exemplary, since it highlights just these primes. For a basic formulation of the countable units legible on it reads, respecting their layout along and as eight pairs of 'ribs':

$$(7 \times 2) + (8 \times 2) + (9 \times 3) + (10 \times 2) + (11 \times 7) = 2(7 \times 11)$$

The text goes on to base calculations of great sophistication on this pair of primes 7 and 11, ciphers of earth and night sky throughout America, dimly remembered it seems in

the Old World too. Seen from Athens, city of the seven cave-orifices of the head and the cipher that is neither divisible nor a multiplier within the decade, the zodiac constellations numbered the 11 who 'went to heaven', that is prior to intrusive Libra.

Then, a year or two later, a journey to Bororo country in Pantanal yielded further insights. For the Museu Rondon at the Mato Grosso Federal University (UFMT) in Cuiabá houses an Adugo biri that had been donated not long before by local representatives of the Bororo themselves. In other words, these people today may not obviously be giving the kind of all-night musical performance that so entranced Lévi-Strauss when he went there in the 1930s (as he reports in *Tristes tropiques*); yet through this recent gift and their description of it they showed that they still had the intelligence of the night sky and of mathematics that inheres in Adugo biri. With that, moreover, they continued to complement in visual language the oral 'mentality' of America that Lévi-Strauss came to favour to the exclusion of script, along with his Structuralist followers (the foundation myth of *Mythologiques*, M1, is the origin of the Pleiades, according to a Bororo 'oral' account).

As if the Bororo epiphany were not enough, the memory and understandings of time that it presupposes were already being corroborated at that juncture by growing familiarity with *A lenda do Jurupary*. Fully comparable with such rainforest classics as *Watunna* and *Ayvu rapyta*, no less than with the *Popol vuh* itself, this substantial Rio Negro text has an unusually difficult publication history. It was initially edited in the late nineteenth century by Ermano Stradelli (*La Leggenda dell' Jurupary*), who translated into Italian the version given to him by the Manaus leader José Maximiano, son of a Taria tuxaua and a scholar fluent in Tucano, Tupi-Guarani, and Portuguese (also known as nheengatu or a lingua geral of lowland South America, Tupi Guarani is of course the spoken language to which the word jaguar belongs). A century later, Sérgio Medeiros and scholars in São Paulo produced the first edition in Portuguese. Their initiative had the effect of making evident astounding echoes of the Adugo biri, not least in the measuring of astronomical and earthly time. These echoes intensified upon first acquaintance with Stradelli's immensely detailed *Vocabulário português-nheengatu nheengatu-português*, in its fashion complementary to the Bororo *Enciclopédia*, notably with respect to the key phenomena of music, script and the night sky. Thoroughly documented in the *Vocabulário*, since they lay at the heart of Jurupary's nocturnal cult, are the instruments that play his music. In his *Travels on the Amazon* (1853), Wallace reports having gone to great lengths to get hold of samples.

A finely constructed narrative, *A lenda do Jurupary* (to give it its Portuguese title) integrates this Rio Negro text into paradigms of creation and foundation found throughout lowland South America. Through his ancestry and epic adventures, the eponymous hero effectively maps that confluence with the Amazon, connecting it with the Orinoco of *Watunna* to the east (via the improbable Casiquiare canal), and with the Andes to the west. Recalling his remote origins in the night sky and the Pleiades' descent into earth, he honours the ancient callings of fisher and planter in his very name and goes on to orchestrate the Rio Negro federation through his music. He names each of the instruments that he conjures from the body of his defeated rival Ualri in a language or dialect of the region: his own Taria speech he reserves for the jaguar (Iasmecerene), and signals his Nachtmusik's crux at the midnight hour. In assigning this inaugural role to the jaguar, Jurupary doubtless shares just the rainforest intelligence of the night evident in the Adugo biri. Against this, however, must be set the new laws

and prohibitions, more in the solar tradition of the Andes, which he promulgated upon declaring himself leader of the federation.

Following indications given by Hugh-Jones, Fabian and others, it is possible to detect in Jurupary's story a precise awareness of just the astronomical norms inscribed in the Adugo biri corpus and presupposed generally in texts of the tropical rainforest, saliently the sky maps of the Barasana, say, or the Kogi. Examples are: the appeal to the prime number 11 as a cipher of the night sky; the Pleiades and the galactic hub as the two crossroad markers of Milky Way and zodiac; and the yearly struggle between stars, led by the jaguar, and the sun. In the Fourth World, the tiny difference between these two kinds of year, sidereal and synodic, is seen to generate time spans commensurate with creation itself. According to this longer story of world ages, the jaguar recovers primordial power during a solar eclipse, when he descends to excoriate.

To this degree, the markings on the jaguar's skin may be read as tokens of his survival from the deepest night, of his endurance. This thought materializes in bronze, in the rare American examples of work in that metal. Bronze disks from Catamarca (northern Argentina) render his likeness through the *cire perdue* technique, with a precision that at first glance might suggest standardized industrial production. Carefully examined, they reveal rather their Fourth World origin in asymmetries that continue to confront night sky with sun and to allude to world-age metamorphosis. Numerate, these 'bronces sin nombre' as they have been called were brought into sharp focus in the exhibition *Por ti América*, which opened in Rio in 2005. They certainly benefit from being read as a version of the jaguar that would state political power to be awesome, enduring and unambiguous.

For this is by no means always the case. As such, radical ambiguity towards his person is evident already among the Bororo. A forefather, he is nonetheless assigned sexual leftovers in the last of the seven caves; revered as the first of the night sky 11, he is ceremonially kicked rather than revered along the sun's east-west path that is the axis of the community. Again, in the stone sculpture of the Isthmus he may be enthroned yet is also the throne that is sat upon. For all his defence of the wild, claw raised to protect the threatened tree, his thunder roar may come to promise rain to the farmer. While his 11-starred tail may recall night sky ancestry, his back may even function as a humble metate, with markings that match sidereal with solar cycles.

Continuously cross-referencing, these representations of the jaguar body may inform the reading of Andean texts which, beginning already millennia ago with the stelae at Chavin, invoke the rainforest lowlands. A striking and unexpected instance is Guaman Poma's *Nueva coronica* (recently the object of inept European critique), in its depictions of the 'savages' of Antisuyu. Drawing on incontestably native authority, this text reports on the ancestral jaguar of the lowlands, otorongo or uturunqu in Quechua, with its intricately marked skin and its whiskered and proudly human face (pp. 155, 268), which figures with the snake in the warrior's coat of arms (p. 167). Moreover, the warrior's array and diadem numerically invoke just the play of proportions that enlivens the Adugo biri, 22:7. Endlessly rehearsed in the yearly dance of the sun and Hermes (Mercury), the planet closest to it, this ratio inheres in the countable units on Natterer's skin and of course produces pi, accommodating the whole to the night sky, in the arithmetic of moon and constellations. There can be no doubt overall about Guaman Poma's imperial Inca view of the lowland forest as home to a dangerous other, gripped by jaguar worship. These Antisuyu pages do much to vindicate the science

embodied in this arch-predator, brilliant in the 'forests of the night' (Blake's fascination with the star-eyed 'tiger-cat' of Surinam would support this allusion).

### Mesoamerica and its books

The insights prompted by the Adugo biri correspond to the larger idea of the American tropics, inclusive of Mesoamerica, the land of calendar systems and screenfold books. The ancient tropical communality that can be argued for (and has been) on the basis of the iconography, numeracy and logic seen in stone inscriptions in the Upper Amazon and Mesoamerica alike is made sharply evident on the surfaces of the Bororo jaguar skins, on the one hand, and the pages of the Mesoamerican books on the other. Indeed, as 'jaguar script' Adugo biri serves as an enabling concept for both groups of texts, to a hitherto unsuspected degree. This is as true of the books written in the widespread script known in Nahuatl as *tlacuillo* as it is of those written in the phonetically specific glyphs of eastern Olmec, lowland Maya or Zapotec. Mesoamerican and South American texts alike appeal, for example, to visual puns, cumulative counting, and the binary play between black and red: in Nahuatl this pair of terms (*tlilli tlapalli*) of itself may denote script.

For the reasons noted, the Mesoamerican script system was bound by definition to remain off limits in Lévi-Strauss's masterly four-volume account of 'oral' America (*Mythologiques*). For many, this has had the effect of foreclosing Adugo biri as a conceptual source, the more unfortunate since in it the Jaguar Adugo has a seminal presence. As the mother culture of Mesoamerica and the inventor of its calendar, the Olmec described and portrayed themselves as the jaguar people. They stylized their persons as this feline, complete with flecked fur, eyebrows and whiskers.

Predator in the tropical night, the Mesoamerican jaguar likewise embodies its powers, his spots stellar; and during solar eclipse he emerges with a vengeance, as we are reminded by the account of the world ages narrated in the Maya *Popol vuh* and inscribed on the Mexica Sunstone. Again, he also defends the wild against the farmer, obstructing the *Popol vuh* Twins who are destined to become sun and moon (the Bororo Meri-doge). When the Twins are obliged to work as farmers, the land they clear by day is restored to forest in the 'heart of the night' (u kux aqab). The restitution is done by a team led by the jaguar and fellow feline panther who appear in order, as if in turn over the horizon, and who number the by now predictable 11.

No less consonant with rainforest norms is the fact that, as at Teotihuacan, the roar of the Mesoamerican jaguar may be interpreted as the thunder which announces the annual monsoon. So that again the nocturnal hunter of the forest comes to aid the farmer, his visible daily mask or person evolving into nothing other than that of the rain-god Tlaloc (as Covarrubias showed). In this way, the residual patches of jaguar fur on Tlaloc's skin attach that feline simultaneously to the year of the seasons, and therefore the sun.

In the elaborate mechanisms of the Mesoamerican calendar, the great spans of time generated by the difference between the year of the stars and that of the sun are the focus or premise of numerous texts which, like the Sunstone, posit our 'quinto sol' or fifth world age as a fifth of the precessional cycle. At the same time, the evolutionary story told over these spans, as in the *Popol vuh*, underlies the logic of the Twenty Signs

that constitute the count of human digits, I to XX. In this story, Jaguar (XIV) tops the line of vertebrates that begins with the earth Caiman (I) and runs through Lizard (IV), Snake (V), Deer (VII), Rabbit (VIII), Dog (X) and Monkey (XI), and reaches up to Eagle (XV) and Vulture (XVI). In diet, the carnivore Jaguar has the Sign that ‘doubles’ that of the herbivore Deer: the Jaguar–Deer binary (XIV–VII) is celebrated in hero names of the highland Maya and Mixtec alike; similarly depicted, the skins of each are valued in Mexica tribute lists (Of itself, deerskin signifies the written page in screenfold books made of that material, just as *Adugo biri* signifies writing).

This, then, becomes the context in which to propose yet closer readings of the corresponding Mesoamerican texts. A telling start may be made with the *tlacuillo* image of Tlaloc found in the deerskin screenfold named after archbishop Laud (p. 45), which has a well-analysed oral counterpart in the Twenty Sacred Hymns of the Mexica. On this page, Tlaloc causes the Flood that ended the first of the world ages, while his Jaguar or Ocelot attire anticipates the end of the second, as well as the Olmec beginnings of Mesoamerican history. As Sign XIV, his Jaguar mask most ingeniously invokes the thunder that, along with Snake lightning (Sign V), every year announces Rain (Sign XIX; i.e.  $XIX = XIV + V$ , the ‘ocelo-coatl’ or Jaguar-Snake of his Hymn). This much had been demonstrated before. But consider now the fact that in this function Tlaloc wears his magnificent jaguar skin over head and shoulders, exactly as if it were an *Adugo biri*. By this means he may be understood to be authorizing, in the first place as it were, the order of arithmetical and visual sophistication legible on this screenfold page. Moreover, as we have seen, his Jaguar-Snake comprises the insignia of the rainforest warrior. Counterparts may similarly be found for the Tlaloc who embodies the seasons in the Tepepulco Manuscript (f.252v; Sahagún’s *Primeros memoriales*).

Denoted by a neat patch of fur on the cheek, Tlaloc’s power over the seasons in the Tepepulco text is again arithmetically tied to his jaguar ancestry. This time the connection is made not so much through the Twenty Signs seen in Laud as through the 18 score days which make up the Mesoamerican year, the 18 Feasts as they are called (*ilhuitl* is both special day and 20 days in Nahuatl). In this calculation, Tlaloc is the heart and hinge of the year, his contribution being five Feasts of monsoon and four Feasts of irrigation: these periods of 100 and 80 days are intercalated with the three windy Feasts of May (60 days) and the six non-planting Feasts that run from September to the end of December (120 days). To realize this means respecting, no less than in the case of Laud, the ingenuity with which numbers and proportions of the year may be encoded in the *tlacuillo* representation of the Jaguar Tlaloc.

In the same Tepepulco Manuscript, the following chapter continues to refer the Jaguar to the year (f.253), as it is defined now in the cycle of 52 known as the year binding (*xiuhmolpilli*). Long established in the Mesoamerican calendar as the permutation of the Thirteen Numbers with four of the Twenty Signs, the 52 years in question were traditionally ‘bound’ among the Mexica and their Chichimec predecessors in the year named 2 Reed (Ome Acatl). In the Tepepulco account of this event, the Sign for the year Reed clusters meanings, repeated throughout the cycle, which literally rest on a strip of Jaguar skin. Between leaves of varying colour, the Reed functions as the shaft of an arrow (this is customary in depictions of Reed, Sign XIII): the point is protected by cotton, like that of poisoned rainforest darts, and a tally of Olmec numbers – a bar for 5, a dot for 1 – is arranged according to Olmec norms of

vertical place–value notation. Eleven is the dominant total, in the emblematic combination of two bars and a dot known as palatine (*tlacateopan*). This ‘eleven’ device is explicitly assigned to the Olmec and their calendar, for example in histories of Cholula (*Historia tolteca chichimeca* f.41); numerically it governs the astronomical calculations seen in Laud and other screenfolds that pertain to the night sky. All this is consistent with the fact that the length of the 52-year cycle and the precise moment it began, in the kindling of New Fire, was determined not by the sun by day but the stars by night.

In other words, the Jaguar of Tlaloc’s seasons and the solar year continues to derive from its ancient nocturnal counterpart, the jaguar of the night sky and the sidereal year, darkness and eclipse: this latter especially invests the cipher 11, as in the Adugo biri. Each of the two kinds of year has its own length and as we have seen the slight difference between them generates the great cycles of creation calculated in texts like the Sunstone, on which Four Jaguar names the eclipse that ended the second world age. The two kinds of year are the focus of screenfold chapters (Borbonicus, pp. 23–40; Borgia, pp. 29–46; Fejérváry, pp. 5–22 etc.; Laud, pp. 21–2, 39–44 etc.), which construct the 18 Feasts as a solar 7 matched by a sidereal 11. It will be recalled that this is precisely the pair of primes that govern the calculations on Natterer’s jaguar skin. According to the logic of that text, in the Feast chapters in these *tlacuillo* screenfolds the Jaguar, emerging from his cave, gets to lead the 11 of the night sky. Stylized, his whiskers or body hairs (fur) even enumerate the corresponding proportions of the 18 Feasts that constitute the year (11 + 7).

In Mesoamerica, the Jaguar heritage of Adugo biri in *tlacuillo* texts, of which the merest indication is given here, is complemented by statements in the Maya tradition. Lowland and highland Maya alike acknowledge the Jaguar Balam as progenitor. His testicles feature unashamedly in the repertoire of dynastic hieroglyphs, the script unit whose characteristic oval shape has been compared with the typical fur marking of that feline. The hieroglyphic inscriptions in stone that have survived at Yaxchilan depict actual books of Jaguar skin (which have not survived anywhere), analogous in shape to the deerskin screenfolds, whose pages serve to measure the passage of the night, matching heartbeats with the coursing of the stars. As such the ‘jaguar script’ tradition has been continued explicitly in the Maya lowlands in the celebrated Books of Chilam Balam (i.e. of the jaguar mouth or speaker, as of the Bororo onça falador), which transcribe the hieroglyphs into alphabetic Maya. In the Book of Chumayel (p. 62), the Four Jaguar that ends the second world age on the Sunstone is echoed in the disaster recorded under that Sign (can ix – ix being a synonym for balam), a ‘tilting of sky and earth’ (nixpahal caan y luum) possibly induced by the discrepancy between the solar and the sidereal year.

In all this, the Jaguar books of the Maya, hieroglyphic and alphabetic, measure the very vision of the year and time that is induced by bloodletting and fasting. The vision is granted in and as the protean caiman-snake known as Xiuhcoanahual in Nahuatl, which embodies the idea of the year and time in *tlacuillo* texts. At Yaxchilan, this metamorph arrives armed and empowers the dreamer. In the longer cultural history of the tropical Fourth World, the Maya statement in stone from the Classic Period stands as a principal link to the ancient rainforest on the one hand and, on the other, the cult of the Jaguar later emblazoned in the Books of Chilam Balam.

It is not as if the jaguar has been ignored in studies of Mesoamerica from ancient Olmec beginnings onwards, though scholars have had little to say about the now vanished books made from its skin. Nor is the notion of South American parallels (precedent?) exactly novel as such, though again little has been said about the intellectual coherence evidenced in stone over millennia in the tropics. Rather, recognizing the intelligence and scope of Adugo biri texts much enhances our capacity to decode and make sense of Mesoamerican equivalents of this Jaguar script. Moreover, it opens the way to fuller readings of Latin American literature, of texts that draw more or less directly on the Fourth World palimpsest. In this, the signal and typically charged example is Borges's 'fictions', specifically the one entitled 'La escritura del dios'.

### La escritura del dios

At first sight, the world constructed in Borges's fictions has little if anything to do with that of Adugo biri. Indeed, Borges has understandably been thought of as the least indigenist of American writers, in stark contrast to, say, Miguel Angel Asturias and Ermilo Abreu Gómez, who translated and based much of their writing on classic Maya texts like the *Popol vuh* and the *Books of Chilam Balam* (*Hombres de maíz*; *Canek*), or Mário de Andrade and João Guimarães Rosa who did the same with rainforest texts and beliefs (*Macunaima*; 'Meu tio o jaguarete'). By including 'La escritura del dios' in *El Aleph* (1949), however, Borges intimated a similar order of intertextuality.

In this fiction, Borges posits the plight of the Maya priest Tzinacan who has been tortured by Pedro de Alvarado and left to languish in a hemispheric prison, half of which is occupied by a jaguar. The light that enters momentarily at noon when food is lowered from above enables Tzinacan to register and then gradually decipher the designs on the jaguar's skin. This is the 'handwriting of the god' he recognizes as ancestral. As at Yaxchilan, it induces an empowering vision, which will restore the pyramid and guarantee him an omnipotence that he declines to exercise, however.

Revealed in the midday flash of light, the jaguar script decoded by Tzinacan emerges from habitual darkness. A divine message carried to him over aeons and through generations, it has been formed through the chain of being implicit in the Twenty Signs, the caiman earth (I) that feeds the Deer (VII) that feeds the Jaguar (XIV). As if to confirm precisely this derivation, the Jaguar's message to Tzinacan is said to be conveyed through just these life forms and to reach him as no more and no less than 'fourteen words', XIV being Jaguar's number in the Twenty Signs (could Borges have been a covert student of Mesoamerican script? – Alfonso Reyes is invoked as a decipherer in the fiction 'Tlön'. As for the feline, the first drawing Borges is known to have produced as a child is of a jaguar, or tiger). At all events, the jaguar script and vision that empower Tzinacan are no less explicitly Maya than he is, in his cult of the Jaguar, the beast that is named Balam in both lowland and highland Maya. Fed by the creation story in the *Popol vuh* (here called *Libro del Común* after Adrian Recinos's 1947 translation), the vision encompasses all time, fathoms its beginnings in the early metamorphoses into fish and then monkeys, and focuses on the terrible retribution wrought by the night sky in the second world age, dramatized in the excoriating jaguars in that text, and named Four Jaguar both on the Sunstone and in the Chilam Balam Book of Chumayel.



Very few years after 'La escritura del dios' appeared, the Cuban Alejo Carpentier produced his own version of the world-age jaguar episode in *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), adapting it for good measure from Asturias's translation of the *Popol vuh*. At this juncture, the power of his source, as an understanding of time and creation, prompted a character in the novel to note its superiority over the Bible. He opines that the jaguar episode supplies a moral lesson about the perils of power, exploitation and the machine sadly lacking in Old World creation myth. In *Visión de América* (1948) Carpentier confirms this American insight: 'Es el mundo del Génesis que halla mayor su expresión en el lenguaje americano del Popol vuh que en los versículos hebraicos de la Biblia.'

Though now beyond jaguar terrain, on the prairie far to the north, Tzinacan's cosmic vision and epiphany were subsequently matched in Borges's briefest of fictions 'El etnógrafo' (1969). Going to visit the Indians as a doctoral student taught Fred Murdock more than he needed to know, for academic purposes. For, living with them 'out west', Fred learned even to dream in their language and on nights of full moon gained insights so significant that Western knowledge systems came to seem inadequate ('our science, seems mere frivolity to me now'). He ended up as a librarian at Yale, as mute as Tzinacan in his prison, similarly imbued with understandings of time beyond Western ken and description (in Fred's case, the source is not jaguar script but the lessons attributable to Buffalo Woman, author of calendar and cosmogony, who had brought Mesoamerican maize to the Mississippi).

In Borges's fiction, cosmic visions and revelations of this order are in fact not uncommon, a much-quoted example being the one inspired by 'Beatriz' in the title story of *El Aleph*. What distinguishes those of Tzinacan and Fred is their specifically American root, potent for Maya priest and invasive white alike, and their relevance therefore to a whole possible argument, deducible from the fictions, about Western knowledge and native America. A similar awakening or revelation is reserved for the eponymous hero of 'Funes el memorioso', when he recovers consciousness after a fall and sees everything preternaturally. Imprisoned in his cot 'en su pobre arrabal sudamericano', Funes looks 'older than the pyramids', by implication not just those of Egypt, since he is said to have Indian features (su cara taciturna y aindiada); hence he recalls the guardian of pyramids Tzinacan, and his radical re-formulation of language – and through it philosophy – has its root in a comparable awareness of time, so intense in this case that he is nicknamed the chronometer ('el cronométrico Funes'). In turn, the night-long encounter in this fiction in which Funes recounts his understandings to the Borges-like narrator from Buenos Aires recalls the decisive confrontation in another, 'El Sur'. There, the porteño Dahlmann meets his fate on the pampa, recognizing his other in the form of a gaucho identified by his Indian features, by attire named in the three native languages of what became Argentina (vincha, poncho, chiripá), and by an air of being washed and polished by time over generations. Like Fred, Dahlmann is a librarian; and like him he has an ancestor who as immigrant or invader had perished in the frontier wars, a grandfather literally pinned to the ground, as it were, 'lanceado por los indios de Catriel'.

This native opposition to imported system even pervades those fictions that are apparently most universal in theme, for example when assessing the origins and scope of human language and belief with the professional eye of the librarian ('La Biblioteca de Babel'), or when awed by the extreme distortions of knowledge prompted by Second World War propaganda, which suddenly lent an anxious edge to literary play

(‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbius Tertius’). For even here we find a certain numerical engagement with a foundational America, when not a forgotten Old World. The obsession with the Adugo number 11, which drove Funes to invent a special word to count the 33 gauchos who supposedly invented Uruguay, continues with the eleventh and only known volume of *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön* (where reports on the language and the ‘tigres transparentes’ of that planet may be found), while in the Library it is repeatedly invoked as half the total of the original alphabetic letters. In both of these fictions, the precise and irreducible clue (to use their style) is to be found in the phrase ‘*axaxaxas mlö*’, an 11-letter quotation in the text that exemplifies the language of Babel, or Babylon, the Old World’s foundational city, and also proves to belong to that of Tlön, the invented planet. In the Library, this distinctive phrase entitles a volume in the hexagon administrated by the first-person narrator and is said to be ‘susceptible to cryptographic or allegorical ‘reading’; in Tlön it illustrates grammatical principles of that planet’s language, where (as for Funes) ‘the world is successive, temporal, but not spatial’.

Others have rightly dwelt on the sophistication of these stories, in their play with debates persistent in Western philosophy, their concern with linguistic origins and Ursprache, their ‘refutations’ of time, even the droll oppositions made between the northern Tlön, with its monosyllabic adjectives, and the south, where, as in the phrase *axaxaxas mlö*, everything is somehow a verb. What has attracted less attention is their effective refutation of Western and Old World supremacy, that effortless assumption transferred from the biblical Babel to enlightened philology: that human language and hence thought could never have originated in America, even though Montaigne and Locke imagined all the world was once like that continent (Funes’s understanding of language is compared to Locke’s in his fiction). In the Library, the origin of the language in which its books were written, its Ursprache, was discovered, like America, ‘five hundred years ago’. Three hundred years ago, we are told, the discovery began to have severe intellectual consequences for Western philosophy.

Where, then, did this language originate? The answer (which must be obvious enough by now) is stated so unambiguously in these fictions by Borges as always to have been heard just as a joke, which in literary critical practice it has been condemned to be, so radically does it flout the Western premise. This Ursprache is ‘a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabic inflections’. Not only does this diagnosis disregard the shibboleth of Babel, it very precisely inverts the routes of diffusion, biblical and ‘scientific’ alike, imagined by the Old World. For it traces language from the New World to the Old, rather than vice versa. The Ursprache has its cradle in South America and spreads to the Semitic (Arabic) Middle East, via eastern Asia (Samoyed belongs with the ‘Ural-Altaiic’ family whose name follows Uqbar in the mysterious encyclopaedia of Tlön) and then Eastern Europe (Lithuanian exemplarily preserves the Indo-European case system). The fiction ‘La biblioteca de Babel’ is known to have derived much of its detail from the essay ‘La biblioteca total’, which Borges published in *Sur* in 1939; referring back to it sharpens our focus on the fundamentally Americanist logic of the fiction, because this is so precisely absent from the essay.

Contemplating Borges’s fictions for a moment in this light may enhance our awareness of something like a covert Americanism in their author, which is unquestionable in ‘La escritura del dios’. There, the writing in question is inscribed on

a jaguar skin, when the very name of that creature belongs to the notional *Ursprache* Guarani. Hence, the legible jaguar is confirmed as a primary concept for the Fourth World (Iauarete, Adugo, Iasmecerene, Uturunqu, Ix, Balam, Ocelotl), and for human thought beyond it.

## Note

Overall, this piece aims to update one thread of the argument of *Book of the Fourth World*. Within a comprehensive idea of (Latin) American literature and culture fostered by Jean Franco and Will Rowe, it has been advanced by teaching the Introduction to the Humanities courses at Stanford, ‘American Genesis’ (2001–03, with Lúcia Sá), and ‘Roots and Routes: narrative identities and geographies of the Americas’ (2003–05, with Richard Rosa and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano). The particular angle on tropical America was refined thanks to a Stanford Humanities Center fellowship (2000–01). The references to Lévi-Strauss continue the concern with ‘orality’ and script in the Fourth World first prompted in conversation with Gayatri Spivak in Iowa City in 1968. See also ‘American genesis as doctrine’, *Rethinking the Americas: Crossing Borders and Disciplines*, edited by Cathy Jrade. *Journal of Luso-Hispanic Studies* (Vanderbilt University) 1 (2004): 113–34.

Details of the Adugo biri and rainforest texts are supplied in a series of three articles in the São Paulo *Revista do Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia*: ‘Jurupary articula o espaço dos tária e a ciência da América tropical’, 9 (1999): 259–67; ‘Meaning in a Bororo Jaguar Skin’, 11 (2001): 243–60; and ‘Peixes, constelações e Jurupari: a pequena enciclopédia amazônica de Stradelli’ (with Lúcia Sá), 14 (2004 [2005]): 343–56. The first is included in Medeiros, Sérgio, ed. 2002. *Makunaíma e Jurupari, cosmogonias ameríndias* (São Paulo: Perspectiva,); the second was expanded to include reference to the Cuiabá skin in ‘The painted jaguar skins of the Bororo’, *Territórios e Fronteiras* (UFMT) 4(2) (2003): 143–62; and the third serves as the introduction to Stradelli, Ermanno. 2006. *Vocabulário Português Nheengatu – Nheengatu Português*. São Paulo: Atelier. I am most grateful to Maria Bia Florenzano, of the São Paulo Museum (MAE), for her decisive support in all this and for inviting me there in the first place, and to the admirable pioneers of CEMA (Eduardo Natalino, Márcia Arcuri, Leila França, Cris Bertazoni). CEMA was heavily involved in the *Por Ti América* exhibition, not least in preparing the catalogue (Rio: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2005), which illustrates the metallic jaguar. For more details, see González, Luis R. 2004. *Bronces sin nombre*. Buenos Aires: Fundación CEPPA (especially the photograph and commentary on the Lafone Quevedo disk, p. 19). (I owe my copy of this work to Jorge Cordonet.) A fine example of the stone jaguar in the form of a metate, from Guapiles (Costa Rica), was recently acquired by the Cantor Museum, Stanford University.

Full analyses of rainforest texts and their wider literary impact (for example, on Mário de Andrade, João Guimarães Rosa and Alejo Carpentier) are given in Lúcia Sá’s *Rain Forest Literatures* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004). The dyspeptic reference to recent readings of Guaman Poma is encouraged as much by loyalty to Andeanist colleagues Olivia Harris, Val Fraser, Denise Arnold and Penny Dransart, as by the demeaning of native America explicit in the Italian-led attempt to ascribe a Jesuit origin to the *Nueva crónica*.

The invoking of *tlacuillo* and Mesoamerican texts relies on *Feather Crown: the Eighteen Feasts of the Mesoamerican Year* (British Museum Press, 2005) and has benefited from early collaboration with Dawn Ades and discussion with colleagues and former students at Essex (Oriana Baddeley, Ele Wake, Tim Laughton, Jo Harwood), at ENAH, UNAM and CIESAS in Mexico (Federico Navarrete, Luz Mohar, Keiko Yoneda, Rafael Zimbron), at Indiana University (Galen Brokaw, Millie Gimmel, Mónica Díaz), and CEMA. Further detail is given in 'Tlaloc roars: Native America, the West, and Translation'. In *Cultural Transgressions. Research Methods in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues*, edited by T. Hermans, M. Baker and M. Olohan. Manchester: St Jerome, 2002: 165–79; 'Indigenous intelligence in Spain's American Colony', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* xxxvi (2000): 241–53; 'The year in the Mexican codices: the nature and structure of the eighteen Feasts', *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* 34 (2003): 67–98; 'Native numeracy in tropical America', *Social Epistemology* 15 (2001): 299–318.

Among those committed to explaining the dense prose of Asturias, the Guatemalan writer and critic Arturo Arias has a special place. The detection of an unlikely 'Borges indigenista' stemmed from updating the edition of *Ficciones*, which Peter Hulme and I had originally published with Harrap in 1976; Peter spotted the drawing of the feline and it now adorns the cover of the Duckworth edition (1999). The same untiring eye spotted the references to Blake's interest in the South American 'tigers' that are reported in Richard and Sally Price's edition of Stedman's 1790 *Narrative* of his expedition to Surinam (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. See especially p. xlii and the engravings).

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