



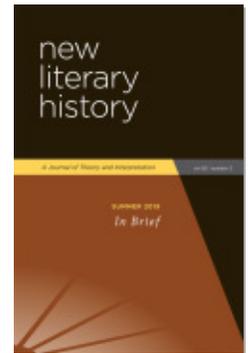
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IMAGINE A STORY THAT IS LIKE THE DNA of an organism. Story spiraled around protein spindles and other encasings of fact and fiction. Fabula . . . first one thing and then another. Who first told the tale that a seed could be saved? Planted? Improved . . . over generations?

Consider Aesop, “The Ant and the Grasshopper”: “In a field one summer’s day a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart’s content. An Ant passed by, bearing along with great toil an ear of corn he was taking to the nest.” What reader doesn’t know what’s coming as this Ant bears civilization’s fruits and burdens? Both winter and the ever-present moral: “IT IS BEST TO PREPARE FOR THE DAYS OF NECESSITY.”¹ We know too that this Ant from the Greek world of sixth century BC was *not* carrying an ear of maize, even if ants could perform Herculean feats. Maize was telling its own fable, elsewhere.

Mythos (Greek for “story”) explains how things came to be, through sacred fictions considered true. *Fabula* (Latin for “a telling”) plays more openly with the truth via allegorical personification still shrouded in mythic shape-shifting, sometimes offering a simple moral, but more often underscoring societal rules only to cut against their grain and open up freewheeling critique. In this fabulous world the takeaway is up for grabs, open to interpretations drawn from the critters’ fights over staples of power: food, sex; sex, food, carnal knowledge or authority. “Our Greece,” given a Nativist reading . . . boils down to corn, grits, pozole, your mama. And the ways Mama may answer back.

We want to tell a story. How the animals are persons, how persons are plant and animal. Fabula says we are children of the corn. Seeds we have saved conscripted us . . . to grow diversely and change. Imagine, a maize-matrix domesticating the domesticators. Say in Tabasco or Veracruz where maize began to write itself: trefoil signs like a fleur-de-lis, two leaves with a cob in the middle coming out of a man’s head. In this culture of maize, fabulist thought nurtured the *kab’awil* or “double gaze” within which writing emerged as glyphed fabulation. “Here we shall inscribe, / we shall implant the Ancient Word, / the potential,” the *Popul Vuh* tells us in a book of myth that is also fable upon fable.²

One of us grows up near the source of the seed, hears her grandmother tell its fabulas in Spanish, fed by Nahuatl between walks in the mountains. Seven-flower's story gets told between tortillas, feeds something that grows with Rabbit tales, Cri-Cri, Macondo, and the Greeks, with Russian formalism in the university, fabula . . . the story told, first one thing and then another in Xalapa, O-hi-o, Kain-tuck-ee, Roan-oke. Moving the way the seed moved across Indigenous borders—north and east. To where Cherokee tell of an ancestral grandmother who scraped grits from her legs and whose body itself was corn, and where Seminole peoples have told it much the same, or have boiled the Bible down to a story of how Jesus “taught people how to grow corn.”³

One of us grows up eating grits and cornbread in Kentucky, Rabbit tales fabulated by grandfolks. Watches Bugs Bunny. Reads *Tar Baby*, Macondo, and Homer, follows one day the peregrination back to a source: seven million pilgrims at Tepeyac . . . south and west—the hill where Tonantzin made the maize grow. Our Mother the snake, Our Mother Corn, Madre Guadeloupe. Imagine turning the pages of a newspaper the next day in the Mexico City bus station to a flash-image of the age-old fabula: an anthropomorphized ear of maize—a young boy in a spandex suit of kernels, maroon and yellow, face painted in the same kernelled style, hair all tassled silks, lower body wrapped in corn leaves amid a green cornfield. The advertisement offers the clearest moral: “*La biodiversidad es vida y future para nuestros hijos*” [Biodiversity is life and future for our children].⁴ More to the point, imagine a cultural politics that would get it—the fabulous ancestral corn-mama, our present and future children's lives not engineered by MONSANTO in service to herbicides, insecticides, quickest corporate profit.

Rabbit, our hero, tests the conventions of literary history, mixes things up from briar patches of Indigenous and Creole literatures across the Americas. Game changer of the very act of reading, Rabbit raises the stakes, changes the conceptual air simply by showing up and staking old claim to the terrain, posing questions about peoples' relations to each other and to the land itself. In tales in Gullah/Geechee Creole, Louisiana or Bahamian Creole, or in Muscogee Creek, Nahuatl, or Zapotec, Rabbit conveys truth-beneath-power allegories of the gulfs between us.

Earnest Gouge's collection written in Muscogee Creek (1916) presents Rabbit performing a number of impossible tasks as he petitions God for more wisdom. God says Rabbit must bring him a gator, then a sack full of mosquitoes, then a rattlesnake. And in each case, Rabbit uses the other creatures' vanity to entrap them or take their measure. God says he could not possibly give Rabbit more cunning and pushes Rabbit, trickster of the impossible task, to the margins, and thus to the global stage of Bugs Bunny's pervasive “What's up, Doc?”⁵

And so it is in “Dios castiga a Conejo”—Andrés Henestrosa’s Spanish-language Zapotec tale from Oaxaca—and in Betty Mae Jumper’s Seminole version, and through a standard Gullah/Geechee tale that also shows up across the Caribbean into Columbia and Venezuela, and in West African repertoires, especially from Senegal, where the tale’s earliest print version appeared in Abbé Boilat’s *Grammaire de la langue Woloffe* (1858).⁶ This is a common pattern: fables appear among the earliest examples of emergent colonial/postcolonial literatures in Western scripts, and whether in tales of Spider or Tortoise or a Signifyin’ Monkey, they chart connections across languages and nations.

Imagine a writing marked by the fabulous world it would summon. Consider the Mayan logograph for the word “dream” and “spirit-companion” (*way*): portal to the imagination. It depicts a human face “peeled away to reveal the spotted hide of a jaguar” or a jaguar face pulled away to reveal the human.⁷ The logographic and syllabic signs of early Mayan writing speak from a fabulous realm of narrative, encapsulated in this single written word of the double gaze. Indigenous literatures of the Americas continue to sustain a fabulist imagination in the face of assumptions of their demise.

Consider the fable “Stalhanka chuchut”/“La gotita de agua” written in Totonac by Emilia Gonzalez Mendoza, a Totonacan student at the Intercultural University of Veracruz. One little droplet of water looks from a cloud at a despairing farmer and a dying cornfield below, and says to another little drop of water, “I want to help.” The other drop’s reply, “Remember you are only a drop and couldn’t even moisten a single stalk of corn,” doesn’t stop the little drop from making the leap. Her friend decides to follow, and then another: “Me, me and me, others shouted” until “thousands of droplets fell over the field in a noisy downpour.”⁸ This narrative enters a body of literature in a language family of only some 230,000 speakers. What chance, really, does the Totonac language have of survival over another couple of generations? Less chance than this drought-stricken cornfield. Writers across the Americas are in the same position as “la gotita de agua” in their choices of writing in Indigenous languages. Each drop speaks, decides to read, even to write in the mother tongue, and a fabulist ethos provides matrices of support.

From the same southern Veracruz region that produced the Mesoamerican mother culture, *son jarocho* music emerged out of African, Indigenous, and Spanish sounds. Fabulist animal identifications are a mainstay of this Gulf repertory in songs such as “El conejo,” “La guacamaya,” “El gallo,” “La Iguana,” “Los juiles,” and “El pajaro carpintero” (the rabbit, macaw, rooster, iguana, catfish, woodpecker), and “El Perro,” a modern *jarocho* composition narrating amorous memories through the story of a dog. Fabulous motifs have staying power across the Gulf, as George

Clinton's "Atomic Dog" shows from his 1982 album *Computer Games*.⁹ Or consider "Prehispanico" by the Mexican poet Homero Aridjis (1975):

The dead man enters the dog
through his snout
like a frozen ember
jolting him completely

and the dog
with the dead man in his entrails
trots toward the infinite
moves without stopping
never arrives¹⁰

Who is the dead man, and who is the dog? The dog trots "toward the infinite" with something undead lodged in his snout and entrails. This dog, this Mexico, "never arrives," never coalesces, and it seems easy to blame this presumably dead "prehispanico" that has possessed the dog or whom the dog has eaten. Fables force readers to assert their own readings and question every concept.

Yucatec Mayan writer Briceida Cuevas Cob's 1995 book *U yok'ol auat pek' li kuxtal pek'* [The growl of the dog in its existence], offers a counter-fabulation, identifying with the street dog, kicked, pelted with rocks, utterly scorned. Cuevas Cob insists, "Má a uójel ua le pek'a / kímil ku man tu pach a bákel" [You don't know that this dog / is death walking behind your bones].¹¹ This dog walking behind our bones with its low growl carries something crucial from an otherwise occluded doubled gaze. Considering Joseph Jacobs's pronouncement in *The Fables of Aesop* (1889) on whether "the Fable . . . [has] a future," it is easy for us to growl at his answer: "Scarcely . . . we prefer to speak out directly and not by way of allegory. And the truths the Fable has to teach are too simple to correspond to the facts of our complex civilization; its rude graffiti of human nature cannot reproduce its subtle gradations of modern life."¹² Clearly Jacobs, perhaps like Aridjis, had not met Cuevas Cob's street dog, and could not have imagined stepping to the sonic graffiti of George Clinton's *Computer Games* in all its "Bow-wow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah."

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NOTES

1 Aesop, retold by Joseph Jacobs, *Folk-lore and Fable, Aesop, Grimm, Anderson, with Introduction and Notes*, ed. Charles W. Elliot (New York: PF Collier and Company, 1909–14), 17:25–26.

- 2 See Michael Blake, "The Domesticators Domesticated," in *Maize for the Gods: Unearthing the 9,000-Year History of Corn* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2015), 17–22; Gloria Elizabeth Chacón, *Indigenous Cosmolectics: Kab'awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2018). Dennis Tedlock, *2000 Years of Mayan Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010), 311.
- 3 Marilou Awiakta, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993), 10–14; Betty Mae Jumper, "The Corn Lady," in *Legends of the Seminoles* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 1994), 35–37; and Merwyn S. Garbarino, *The Seminole* (New York: Chelsea House, 1989) 63.
- 4 "Secretaría de medio ambiente y recursos naturales, México," *La Prensa*, December 13, 2016, 26.
- 5 Earnest Gouge, *Totkw Mocuse/New Fire: Creek Folktales by Earnest Gouge*, ed. and trans. Jack B. Martin, Margaret McKane Mauldin, and Juanita McGirt (Norman: Oklahoma Univ. Press, 2004), 61–63.
- 6 Andrés Henestrosa, *Los hombres que dispersó la danza* (México: Casa Oaxaca, 2004), 91–94; Jumper, "The Corn Lady," 79; William Bascom, *African Folktales in the New World* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 40–70; and Emil Magel, "The Source of Bascom's Analogue 'Trickster Seeks Endowments,'" *Research in African Literatures* 10, no. 3 (1979): 350–58.
- 7 Tedlock, *2000 Years of Mayan Literature*, 18.
- 8 Emilia González Mendoza, "Stalhanka chuchut"/"La gotita de agua," in *Narraciones indígenas de Veracruz*, ed. Sylvia Schmelkes del Valle (Xalapa: Veracruzana Univ. Press, 2007), 26–29.
- 9 See Micaela Díaz-Sánchez and Alexandro D. Hernández, "The Son Jarocho as Afro-Mexican Resistance Music," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 187–98; and George Clinton, "Atomic Dog," *Computer Games* (Capitol, 1982).
- 10 Homero Aridjis, *Eyes to See Otherwise: Selected Poems*, ed. Betty Ferber and George McWhirter (New York: New Directions, 2001), 91.
- 11 Briceida Cuevas Cob, "Four Poems," trans. Arthur Dixon, in *Latin American Literature Today* 1, no. 6 (2018): <https://dev.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/es/author/briceida-cuevas-cob>.
- 12 Aesopus, *The Fables of Aesop*, ed. Joseph Jacobs (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), 219–20.