

Dividing the world into those who write with notebooks (European alphabetic technology) and those who write with sound/strings (Andean *quipu*) certainly illustrates, as it undercuts, the conventional dichotomy between orality and literacy. This creation story suggests not that one flowed from the other, but the independence of each system. Thus it is not a recapitulation of Socrates' prejudice but a revisioning, one that recalls Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that

primitive societies are oral not because they lack a graphic system but because, on the contrary, the graphic system in these societies is independent of the voice: it marks signs on the body that respond to the voice, react to the voice, but that are autonomous and do not align themselves on it. In return, barbarian civilizations are written, not because the voice has been lost, but because the graphic system has lost its independence and its particular dimensions, has aligned itself on the voice and has become subordinated to the voice. (202–203)

Posed against Lord's example of the irreversible entry into literacy, Vicuña's poetry seems to coincide with the notion that orality is not a lack of writing. Rather than subordinating writing or voice, her poetry puts them into play with each other. It is perhaps the seeming necessity of the subordination that has precluded considerations of postliterate spoken poetry.

Vicuña locates her poetry at the interstices of myth and language, of voice and writing—"sound breathing and sound written." This position allows her to turn what has seemed the most written of all systems, Mayan hieroglyphs, into a form of speaking: "In the Mayan letters Olson speaks of 'their leavings,' (what the Maya left), but in Spanish '*sus dejos*' would be 'their way of speaking'. . . And it is the double aspect of this leaving that interests me . . ." (1994). Playing between these terms—writing that is left, permanently, and speaking that leaves, flees—Vicuña's poetry is secondarily oral. It is composed in writing but influenced by oral forms and then re-oralized in performance.

so
 that is one myth I wanted to recall for you
 and then there is another one
 that
 I particularly love
 this is a myth
 of
 ahh
 a creature
 also contemporary myth
 and this creature lives in the outskirts of lima

 I don't know if you know about lima lima
 is like the quintessential mestizo city
 a city created by the whites that

cannot admit
even to this moment of being
quite in peru
that is to say
quite in the andes
this could be said of santiago
the city where I come from <louder>
can [louder]
you're not hearing me? <no, . . . can't hear you at all>
not at all?
<no . . . nah.>
[laughs]
you see
talking about sound
I am sick
that is the problem
I have a sore throat um
what do I do

<you can't turn that up? can you turn the mike up?>

if I try to speak louder
it will only

<lets take a three minute pause, to set the PA up>

Here the performance is interrupted because of sound's failure to "bridge," as Vicuña earlier put it (or is it the audience's failure to hear?). "Sound breathing" seems to face some of the same problems of illegibility that a written text might, with the occasional advantage that it is easier to forget, to dismember and remember an unpleasant story. The writing of the transcript refuses to forget, marking what arguably might better be forgotten. The irony of the insistence that the poet use an amplification system will become apparent.

so ahhh
I will not repeat the kinds of things
that I was saying
because they are better
lost

[laughs]

but I will pick up with the pistasho

moment and "the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling." The noise that threatens to devour the Indians coming into Lima was placed there by Europeans, strangers from the culture that devalues sound.⁷ The question remains as to whether the people of the notebook can learn to hear the sound before them, for example, at a poetry reading, or whether they will imagine the notes they take away from the event to be sufficient for remembering it.

III. "VOICE IS THE BRIDGE": THE POEM AND ITS SPOKEN DOUBLE

Was that a real poem or did you just make it up yourself?

—question from the audience, quoted by Robert Creeley

While Vicuña's performance provides a dramatic example of the meaning and richness contained in the "commentary" to a poetry reading, it will hardly be received as an argument for the ethnography of the poetry reading as a whole. The exceptional commentary may add some information, but, beyond that, of what concern is the spoken poem to the reader? After all, he or she can normally buy a copy of the poet's book and peruse it at will.

What if the poetry reading, aside from the commentary, contributes to the meaning of the poem and, indeed, constitutes something like a "revised edition"? While a poet reading from a book hardly compares to the primary orality of a poet composing orally, the secondary orality produces a site of recomposition, introduces a relation to a specific audience into the poems (deixis), and may reinflect the written poem with many of the characteristics typical of primary oral poetry. How different is it for an oral poet to call up a poem from memory than for a secondarily oral poet to perform it from a book?

In Vicuña's case, the end of the introductory commentary is acknowledged with "that's it," but the reading of written poems begins without hesitation, suggesting that the commentary and poems are interrelated forms. We have been paying attention to the performance thus far, because it has been an improvised composition of new material; but perhaps we also need to attend to the performances of previously written poems, understanding their spoken versions as alternate forms of publication (as verbal changes from the text are introduced and as the intonation, pacing, and articulation of the spoken version become part of the new poem). The need is more clear in Vicuña's case than with many poetry readings. She does not simply "read" poems from a written text, she weaves variations.

Beginning "¿Adónde van/los suaves innúmeros" in the book version, "Iridesce" (UW 68) is read first in Spanish, then, more slowly and with more distinct pauses at the stanza breaks, in English. In Spanish, the vowels are stretched beyond their "ordinary" duration. At what point would one say that the poem was read "as is" rather than performed or orally versioned, when a careful transcript from tape matches the printed poem? The poem does not follow directly from the

concern with "noise" of the preceding "commentary," but Vicuña continues with a flow that barely admits the interruption of the poem. Does she mean for us to consider it in relation to her "commentary"? It seems to be linking back to the first myth she offered, before the sound system interrupted.

now there has been a lot of debate
 as to how come that
 these cultures who well supposedly didnt have any
 form of writing
 well that also can be debated
 because they had SOFT forms of writing
 like writing with knots
 writing with signs
 just
 on the soil itself
 writing with knots and so forth
 but the main thing
 as I see it
 is that for these people
 the andean people
 everything is language
 as I was just saying
 the humm in this room
 is also language

hmmm

and so is light entering the pores

Only with this last line has the industrial noise of the commentary been eased into relation with the lost light rays that begin the poem. Indians entering the city, or light entering the pores, is language and has been lost. The first lines of "Iridesce," where light is knotted like writing, recall that how to read the strings of the *quipu* is no longer remembered, has also been swallowed:

Adónde van
 los suaves innúmeros

*Where do they go
 all those soft rays*

Apiñándose en haz?

gathering in a knot?

We are given the epigraph from José Lezama Lima: "Prayers are threads / and weaving is the birth of light." Then the next poem begins in Spanish, but in this

case a new version is made. Is this what "soft writing" allows? Vicuña begins by reading only the first page of "Oro es tu hilar" (UW 96–101) in Spanish, dropping out four lines, and concluding with "Marcas señales // Pallá y pacá." She follows this with nearly the full three pages of the English version, including the lines dropped from the first page of the Spanish and then abruptly stopping five lines short of the end of the poem with the line "woven into one."

Have these "readings" of the poem existed before? How should they be considered in relation to the print-published versions, as interpretations, accidents? Why has Vicuña so versioned the poem in reading it? Before we can answer these questions for ourselves—questions that might only occur to someone following along with the recording of this reading in a book—Vicuña begins explaining:

now this whole poem has been constructed with like
so many puns
word plays in Spanish in relation to Quechua

like for example if you say in Spanish estelar
it means starry but it also means "it is a loom"
hmm
and of course the idea of constellations
being woven with words is an ancient idea
and when you say oro in Spanish
you're saying gold but you're also saying I pray
and the real gold in ancient times was the process itself
the art of weaving and so weaving was conceived
as a prayer
and the most precious weavings were burned
so that they could fly
up
in terms of the signs
that the smoke make

hmm

and so

Una es el agua
y su misma sed

water
and its thirst
are one (UW 103)

The segue into the poem ("and so") suggests that, for Vicuña, the poems have a direct, almost grammatical relationship to the commentaries that surround them. Perhaps we cannot even talk about the commentaries and poems as though they were separable, since in the transcript they blend. The next poem "Unuy Quita" is read first in Spanish, then in English (*UW* 106). Phrases like "Fertile valley" and "Cup / in the mist" from this poem echo with the fragment that follows.

Mist is the semen of the mountains
 where the streams are born
 Mist is the semen of the forest
 where coolness is born (part of *UW* 114 in English)

Without an audible page-turn or pause, Vicuña continues, reading "¡Neblinilla fibrosa!" in Spanish (*UW* 110), and then proceeds straight to the English on the facing page, without pause. At lines 8–9, she changes "How beautiful? / How bountiful?" to "How beautiful / How beautiful," matching the Spanish "¡Qué hermoso / qué hermoso!"

and so
 this will be the last poem because
 we have one more singer
 coming up

Se acabará
 la fuente
 la propia silencia
 la silbida clave

¡Se acabará!

¿Donde se irá la neblina?
 ¿La bruma vivificante?
 ¿Dónde se irá?

Fresco, Fresco
 ¡El sostén de la tierra!
 ¡Los racimos de llanto!

¡Los corazones apagados
 sin neblinar!

"Se acabará" is read as printed in Spanish, followed by an improvised coda. The English version does not have the coda in translation, but is altered in other ways.

seeee va

se va se va se va

The round spring
its own silence

...

Where did
the fog go [these two lines added as if accidentally]

Where will the fog go?
The life giving mist?
Where will it go?

...

Our hearts extinguished
the fog is gone! gracias [text has "when the fog is gone"]

[clapping]

Dealing with the spoken instances of poetry allows for a rethinking of poetry and its relation to the voice and writing. Numerous threads have been left unexplored. How the intonation of the texts comments on their meaning or the audience's relation to them has not been addressed. The sequencing and re-versioning have not been thoroughly compared to the versions of these poems in print, or in the author's own text. Because this reading was part of a four-person tour sponsored by the Poetry Society of America, the dynamics of its context, perhaps alluded to by Vicuña's initial "because of this almost funny request to speak of myth," might also have been explored fruitfully. Even so, the difficulty of remembering these spoken poems reveals how strongly indebted our notions of poetry are to a textual, artifactual economy. The closure of such a system is inconceivable from an oral point of hearing. What could be the purpose of developing this dispersed notion of poem = multiple versions? If language, and through it poetry, is a form of relation, *unas líneas* that transect Cuzco and every other city to which we bring it, then the difficult navigation across the versions' spans is the only site the poem can have. Or, in the epigraph that began this essay, Vicuña's words: "The poem is not speech, nor in the earth, nor on paper, but in the crossing and union of the three in the place that is not" ("Purmamarca").

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NOTES:

1. *Unravelling Words and the Weaving of Water*, 34, subsequently *UW*. See Bibliography at end of chapter.
2. Deconstruction demonstrates the active flow of signifiers within the text, but such analysis presumes the stable status of the work itself (as physical, historical object) in order to activate its internal system. A classic example, Roland Barthes's *S/Z: An Essay* destabilizes the text by showing its inconsistencies, a remarkable process only against the expectation of the text's stability; the entertainment of multiple versions of the text would equally achieve such a destabilization.
3. This loose use of "textuality" would be objected to by textual critics like Jerome McGann, whose post-structuralist inflected usage of the same term is intended to oppose the contained "work."
4. While Tedlock disclaims the application of Rothenberg's "total translation" for his work, the term serves here as useful shorthand in distinguishing translation projects, however varied in themselves (and including subsequent variations), that emphasize the rendering of performance dimensions and poetic devices of a particular "telling" of an oral poem from those that minimize them.
5. See both the section of *Unravelling Words and the Weaving of Water* entitled "Palabarmás" and the 1994 *Morning Star Folio* with the same title.
6. See Vicuña, "Thread of the Voice."
7. Despite Derrida's proper contention that "voice" has been accorded metaphysical privilege as a sign of presence, the actual voices of those who did not themselves write (the indigenous peoples living in the Americas at the time of the conquest, the voices of women denied a pen of their own) have been subordinated or, more often, erased from the written record. It might be possible to say that writing has subordinated itself to the image of the voice, but it has seldom listened carefully to the voices themselves.