

CORNEJO POLAR, ANTONIO. *Writing in the Air: Heterogeneity and the Persistence of Oral Tradition in Andean Literatures*. Trans. Lynda J. Jentsch. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. 212 pp.

Though we had to wait nineteen years for Lynda Jentsch's fluid English translation of Antonio Cornejo Polar's classic text, *Escribir en el aire: Ensayo sobre la heterogeneidad socio-cultural de las literaturas andinas*, originally published in 1994, it was well worth it.

Cornejo Polar begins his analysis with a re-creation of that momentous meeting between Father Vicente de Valverde and Atahualpa in Cajamarca on 16 November 1532 when the latter was handed a Bible—or a breviary—by the Dominican priest; the Inca looked at it, opened up its pages, put his ear to its pages to 'hear' if it could 'speak' to him and, when he discovered that it could not do so, Atahualpa contemptuously threw the book to the ground. It was the opening act of an unfolding drama which showed that writing is "not only a cultural matter" but "above all an act of conquest and domination" (23). Atahualpa was captured, imprisoned and forced to buy his ransom with a roomful of gold and silver—all to no avail since he was subsequently executed by the Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, on 26 July 1533. Cornejo Polar then picks his way carefully through a number of canonic works, searching out instantiations when that key historic moment of dispossession was re-created in other cultural and literary texts. He shows, for instance, that the Conquest in Latin America was not so much a story of two languages and two cultures but rather the "intersection of contradictions composed of a history that inextricably overlaps varied and opposing times, worldviews, and discourses" (58).

Cornejo Polar's expert detective work pays rich dividends when he comes across contradictions in apparently straightforward texts. He shows, for example, how El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's utopian promotion of "mestizaje" in his *Royal Commentaries* is an ill-fitting mask which barely hides his tears; "the verbal production of synonymy dissolves the duality of the perspectives that birthed it" (64). Cornejo Polar also deconstructs the logic of José de San Martín's proclamation of Peru's independence in Lima on 28 July 1821 ("Desde este momento el Perú es libre e independiente por la voluntad general de los pueblos y por la justicia de su causa que Dios defiende. ¡Viva la Patria!, ¡Viva la Libertad!, ¡Viva la Independencia!"), by pointing

to how its performative power appears to derive simultaneously from divine intervention as much as from the human political choice of democracy (77). He also suggests that the *desenlace* of Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido* (1899) holds within it a terrible sting in the tail in that the act of "adopting" the Indian children by the "criollo" Marín family meant that they were in effect co-opting incest into Peru's family romance as well as their nation's destiny (93).

This book is, indeed, particularly good at drilling down into texts to discover their intrinsic seam of paradox. It shows how José Santos Chocano's poem celebrating the centenary of Independence from Spain, "Ayacucho y los Andes", ends up praising 'Iberian blood'—a Freudian slip which reveals the cunning plot hatched by the 'criollos' (107)—and how the *indigenista* novel petitioned on behalf of modernity even as it dissolved that same modernity into an organicist utopia (138). It points to the curious fact that "from the almost archaeological depths of Santiago de Chuco", César Vallejo extracted "texts with an astounding modernity" (118), and it shows that, in José María Arguedas's *Los ríos profundos*, Ernesto's subjectivity "can only exist in dialogue with another, collective voice that defines its alterity in language" (150) even while the language of the novel is 'transidiomatic' (150). The book concludes with a wonderful discussion of Vallejo's poem dedicated to Pedro Rojas in *España, aparta de mí este cáliz*, who becomes a symbol of that orality to which *Writing in the Air* feels drawn, concretized in the betacism of Pedro Rojas's speech (171).

Midway between the poetic starkness of Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*—Paz's portrayal of Malinche's rape at the hands of Hernán Cortés as Mexico's "primal scene" is echoed in Cornejo Polar's depiction of Atahualpa's murder by Pizarro as Peru's "primal scene"—and the historiographical precision of Angel Rama's *Ciudad letrada*, *Writing in the Air* is a dense suggestive text which excavates the deeply heterogeneous grammar subtending a number of key cultural and literary texts set in the Andes.

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