

FOREWORD

Antonio Cornejo Polar's book *Writing in the Air: Heterogeneity and the Persistence of Oral Tradition in Andean Literatures* initiates the reader into an area of literary criticism that moves us beyond the familiar grounding of the Western canon into areas at once more challenging and more subtly subversive.

The title, taken from a poem by César Vallejo written during the Spanish Civil War, is in Cornejo Polar's words a "call to orality" that "builds imaginary bridges in order to reconvert the written word to voice." The traumatic origin of the contest between oral and written cultures was "the sudden appearance of writing and the book as enigmatic instruments of conquest with no immediate ties to language or communication. The foundational event that signaled the entry of the book into the New World was recorded by chroniclers and occurred soon after the victory of the Spaniards in Peru when the priest Father Valverde approached the Inca ruler, Atahualpa, and offered him a breviary that the Inca threw angrily to the ground. It was not only writing that baffled the Inca," argues Cornejo Polar, "but also the mechanics of the book (opening it and turning its pages), major indications of the absolute miscommunication that underpins the story of a 'dialogue' as enduring as it is traumatic."

Throughout the colonial period and beyond, the confrontation was enacted and revised in the written histories of conquest, in the ritual dances and reenactments, and in the many dramatic works in Quechua or Spanish on the theme of Atahualpa's death. It was not only the subjugation of the indigenous that was reiterated but also the confrontation of oral culture with the written word, and

“of an old system of verbal messages with the new communicative order based on writing.” The event was both an interaction and a conflict that extends into the present, producing political misunderstanding and stigmatizing Quechua-speaking peoples as “alien to modernity.” Cornejo Polar’s study takes the reader through all the variations of this interplay between speech and written word, thus proposing a counterhistory that subtly questions the traditional categories of literary criticism and underscores the contrapuntal rhythm of Peruvian culture. One of those high points is the marvelous evocations of Quechua song in José María Arguedas’s great novel *Deep Rivers*, whose protagonist, as Cornejo Polar argues, experiences “discontinuous times and plural cultures.” It is most particularly in his account of Arguedas’s novel that Cornejo Polar eloquently states his own convictions and belief in the possibility of nonhegemonic action “achieved through the construction of an intrinsically multiple and de-centered subject, discourse and representation.” The book ends with a lyrical exposition of Vallejo’s poem “‘Pedro Rojas,’ inspired by a comrade who wrote the message just before his execution.” The poem begins, “He took to writing in the air with his best finger: ‘Lib long, komrads! Pedro Rojas.’” Cornejo Polar’s reading of the poem is offered in place of a traditional conclusion and attests to his own utopian desire, and he reads it as a vigorous assertion of humanity as the words battle the negative force of extinction. *Writing in the Air* is not just a book of academic criticism but a thoroughly committed account of a culture that was inaugurated by conquest but was never conquered.

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