

Near Trujillo, in Peru, lie the ruins of Chan Chan, a pre-Inca city that sleeps in its vestiges eroded by the sea breeze. They are mud constructions that, in spite of their material precariousness, testify a certain reddish-brown splendor that colors the *adobe* with the same tone of the indigenous skin.

At the center of this muddy town stands the main square; a huge rectangle on whose edges rises a wall decorated with reliefs of fish swimming in opposite directions. At one point of this *guarda*, the banks of fish cross each other alternately. This point coincides with the Humboldt current, which, in front of Trujillo, crosses the waters of the north with the cold sea of the south.

On this clay wall, tourists and lovers have written names, dates, doodles and political pamphlets, imposing Spanish writing on this zoomorphic alphabet, which in its minimal representation describes a cartography of the wide salty horizon, in the splashing of fish and the roaring murmur of the Pacific. But beyond the theories that make science coincide with the magic of these hieroglyphs, these signs speak another language difficult to transfer to the logic of writing. Perhaps more than concepts organized by a unidirectional thought, these drawings contain noises, voices imprisoned in the mud, guttural descriptions of a pre-columbian geography that dazzled the white man, with the colorful music of its outdoors.

Also, these forms could be translated as representations of a sonorous syllabary, or musical scores of a vital tremor in the mesoamerican territory. Speech and laughter in the rumorously tumbling of the Andean heart. Orality and cry in the clashing of blood along the arterial cliffs. The voice mimicked with the surroundings, like a ventriloquist bird that calligraphs its cooing among the forest. Then came the letter, and with it the Spanish alphabet that muzzled its song.

Then, the oral codes became warning cries to warn the tribes of the foreign invasion. They were sounds of waves in the altiplanic peaks, through the *pututos* or seashells, a sort of mollusk trumpets that transmitted the voice of alarm throughout the Tiawantinsuyo. Thus, they were the cries of birds when the hunter's boot crushes the weeds. Or murmurs between teeth that the indigenous women whisper today in the customs of the frontiers. Imprecise syllables that make the policeman on guard nervous, letting them pass with their chattering contraband. Like parrots babbling in that half-language, in that little tone of *puis*, untranslatable to the page, to the printed letter so founding, so organized, so universalistic, so thoughtful our feverish western head. Our egocentric logos that believes to store its memory in silent libraries, where the only thing that resounds is the word silence written on a little sign.

But that *shhh* is not silence: for the indigenous language perhaps that *shhh* has to do with a toothache and the "s" is the fan that cools the burning cavity. Maybe that *shhh* is also the rain hissing on thatched roofs, or the hissing of the

snake when it is stepped on in heat. How to know, how to translate into letters for our proud understanding, the multiplicity of signifiers that a sound carries.

Certainly, we are imprisoned by the logic of the alphabet. Instruction leads us by the hand along the illuminated path of the ABC of knowledge. But beyond the margin there is an illiterate abyss. A jungle full of noises, like a clandestine fair of flavors and smells and bad words that are always mutating in meaning. Words that pigment only in the heart of the one who receives them. Sounds that are camouflaged in the fold of the lip so as not to be detected by the vigilant writing.

Beyond the margin of the page that is being read, a pagan Babel bustles in unlettered, illegible voices, constantly fugitives of the sense that records them for literature.

Apparently, the page contains the voice and its expressive desire. But this premise is founded with the introduction of the *castiza* and catholic writing in America. Between letter and letter there is a confessional, between word and word a commandment. What is read reads us with the eye of God; the sacred scriptures have his signature. Atahualpa did not know this, that is why he mistook the Bible for a seashell, and held it to his ear to listen to the speaking letter of the creator. And that square and black seashell had neither echoes of the sea nor whispers of the mountain to speak to Atahualpa, hence he threw it to the ground and gave Fray Vicente de Valverde a pretext to justify the genocide of the conquest. Nor did the Inca know that years later, the Catholic King Carlos II was going to forbid the use of native languages by decree. Atahualpa had died before learning to read and, illiterate, continued to listen under the earth to the sound of the tides as an endless language.

Perhaps the mechanism of writing is irreversible, and the literate memory is the triumph of the written culture represented by Pizarro over the oral culture of Atahualpa. But this demonstrates that reading and writing are instruments of power, rather than of knowledge. It is possible that the scar of the printed letter in memory can be opened into a written mouth to reverse the imposed gag. This is demonstrated by the testimony of *Si me permiten hablar* de Domitila, published in 1977, and the chronicles of Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, published in 1615. These and other texts exemplify how orality makes use of writing, doubling its dominion and at the same time appropriating it.

Many are the silences imposed by the graphological culture to the colonized oral ethnicities, but learning to read these silences is to relearn how to speak. To use what words omit, deny or fabricate, to know what about us is hidden, not known or not said. That silence is ours, but it is not silence; it speaks of memory to exorcize the colonial traces and reconstructs our oral dignity shattered by the alphabet.

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*Adiós mariquita linda* has not yet been translated into English.