

Coordinates of Poetry Out Loud

Approaches to the History of the Spoken Word in Mexico

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The winners of the Spoken Fest Slam at the El Chopo Museum. In the background, organizer Rojo Córdova.

FROM THE UNITED STATES TO MEXICO

Poetry out loud has existed for more than 40 years if we locate its starting point at the famous Ginsberg reading of his poem “Howl” in 1955, or The Last Poets, heirs of the Harlem Renaissance and the originators of the Hip Hop movement. We can also mention Open Mic at the Nuyorican Poets Café, the Taos Poetry Circus Heavyweight Championship, or the Poetry Slams in 1980s Chicago, until today, when national

competitions are common, even in high schools. The success of these poetry activities meant that poetry was disseminated on HBO on the “Def Poetry” show, and at MTV’s “Poetry Slams,” an achievement that was a double-edged sword.

In Mexico, Spoken Word appeared on stage and began to develop only seven years ago, and the media do not seem to have given it any weight, although certain institutions like the UNAM, the Sor Juana Cloister University, the French Alliance, and the Spain Cultural Center have. While media interest would help disseminate poetry as a communicative act, it could also diminish both literary quality and the anti-establishment value of the texts themselves.

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OF MEXICO CITY AND BEYOND

The UNAM's first poetry out loud festival was actually organized by Juan José Arreola at Chapultepec Park's Lake House in the late 1950s—that is, contemporaneously with the Beat readings. The more recent version, directed by José Luis Paredes Pacho, was held for the eighth time in 2012, and has a great influence in the emerging scene in Mexico City. It has offered the opportunity for audiences to have access, free of charge, to all kinds of oral traditions, from Cuban *repentista* improvisers or singers of improvised *son* verses from Veracruz, to hip-hop singers of all nationalities.

This festival has always hosted a slam before the event itself, and the winner of the slam performs at the festival. This helps him/her to further his/her professional career, as has happened with Rojo Córdova, “Morocco,” Alicia Revólver, and Manuel de J. Jiménez, among others.

In about 2006, everything exploded and poetry events multiplied. The venue changed, but in non-stop poetry slams people come ready to “throw down” a verse, as though they were gangs, or Veracruz 10-line *décima* improvisers, or, famously, actor/singers Pedro Infante vs. Jorge Negrete. The rules: use your voice, your body, the space, contact with the audience, and the poem. You have the right to three rounds to win the prize, which might be a cover song, audience acclaim, a beer, or a sandwich—almost never all together.

The bars that hosted the first poetry slams were Red Fly and Zinco Jazz Club. The most recent ones have been successful in venues like El Viking or others that have a long history like the legendary Bombay Cabaret.

THE COLLECTIVES

Meanwhile, frustrated because of the lack of access to cultural spaces, young people have been grouping together in different collectives, above all in Tijuana, Guadalajara, and Mexico City. Some of the most active groups, attracted to poetry out loud and performance art, include Palabracaidistas (a play on words in Spanish combining the word for “parachute” and “word”), El Gabinete Salvaje de Poesía (The Savage Poetry Cabinet), Tinta Permanente (Indelible Ink), Colectivo Intransigente (Intransigent Collective), Poesía y Trayecto (Poetry and Trajectory), and *Síncope* magazine (whose name is a play on words combining “syncopated” with “fainting fit”). They stage poetic actions on the street and in public

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transport, shooting “*balabras*” (bullet-words), as Karloz Atl would say. They show the importance of poetry out loud as a form of communicating, playing, denouncing, and empowering, of building community and individuals, of healing the silence that violence has sowed in people.

Nevertheless, rivalries do exist. These are not homogenous or fixed groups. They are wide-open spaces where you can arrive, stay, leave, and return. For that same reason, a space for dissent and criticism is never completely constructed. However, this doesn't make them less interesting. There are more and more people: students, workers, kids who haven't finished school, musicians, circus performers, improvisers, actors, performers, kids from 17 to 60. Poetry becomes a map where we rehearse the discourse that leads us to others and discovers us with them.

VARIATIONS, RADIO, AND INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS

Lots of other poetry festivals—and printed and on-line magazines—exist. Despite a lack of funding, some endure, like the Chilango-Andaluz Festival (Mexico City-Andalusian Festival) or the Festival of Poetry and Movement at the Pino Suárez subway station. Another outstanding one is the Conch Shell Festival in Tijuana and the survival of the Guadalajara Poetry Slam group. This shows that poetry out loud is not a passing fancy and that it has stopped inhabiting only libraries, cultural centers, or university auditoriums. At the same time, for six years, independent publisher VersoDestierro (BanishmentVerse) has been organizing a poetry tourney, Adversary in the Ring, which awards the first three places with a pocketbook publication run.

At this contest, books and poems out loud become a pair of opposites complementing each other: the judges are poets or academics who try to give the same weight to the style and strength of the oral reading as to the composition

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of the text itself. However, despite the fact that Adversary in the Ring brings together writing and reading out loud, more serious aural publications are needed, since the few that exist are insufficient. Cascada de Palabras Cartonera recently put out a CD of the Spoken Word, and Radiocamote is preparing a memoir of its radio program “From Poetry Recital to Poetry Slam” and of several years of slams in mp3 and book formats.

Undoubtedly, radio offers a format for dissemination and broadcasts (podcasts, interviews) more in accordance with the aural format. Radio station Código DF has been broadcasting “Urgent Words” for more than two years, deejayed by Andrés Castueira. The Mexican Radio Institute (IMER) produces and broadcasts poetry podcasts, increasing even more the interest in poetry spoken aloud. Poetry on radio deals with a great social cause: literacy for an audience not made up of poetry experts, and the revalidation of the social group that has written, spoken, and sought out spaces for it to be well-received.

THE STUDIES

Despite the fact that the sound of language is already receiving the attention it is due in linguistics, ICTs, and digital publications, critical studies of poetry continue to not really completely delve into the (contemporary) act of speaking poetry aloud. Meanwhile, comments like the following abound at each poetry reading: “He/she read well, but the poem was a little incomplete,” “He/she writes well, but really screws up the reading,” “He/she isn’t interested in the reader, just in being published,” “It’s the same as always: different texts, but it all *sounds* the same,” etc. So, we have to ask ourselves: Why does the defamiliarization that the poem’s semantics cause continue to be almost the only focus of attention? Why, if the poem wants to communicate, would it seem that the poet doesn’t? Why does it still continue to seem so far from reality



Francisco Daniél Quintanar

Pilar Rodríguez Aranda at the launch of her book of poems, *Asunto de mujeres* (Story of Women).

to us? Why is it so abstract and elitist? But, above all, why are all poems read so similarly?

At each of its meetings or congresses, the National Network of Students of Language and Literature (Rednell) has offered students the opportunity to disseminate their creations and publishing or research projects. So, Rednell has managed to broaden out literature as a national meeting point; and, as the network has grown, it has had to broaden the way we practice literature to include poetry slams. In 2012, the tenth ENELL conference was held in Tijuana and the Fourth National Poetry Slam included 15 participants from Monterrey, Puebla, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico City, Tijuana, Zacatecas, and Guerrero, with the motto “Borders among Reason, Literature, and Body.”

For a little while, poetry became the right to play with our language, a way of rehearsing communication with the other. Perhaps we didn’t have young people’s best poems, but at that time, the only thing that mattered was exploring real and literary space, celebrating the meeting, and the promise of more. Poetry as a meeting place for our collective memory was revived.

POLITICAL SLAM:

VANILLA WAFER VS. #YOSOY132

Built during the administration of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa during the biggest wave of violence the country has ever seen, the Stela of Light is a monument repudiated by Mexicans,¹ a point from which the last mega-marches have exploded in Mexico City. Mockingly nicknamed “the vanilla wafer,” it has finally become a center for digital, interactive culture, where



Poet Edwing Roldán.

we have seen in recent months the (con)fusion between the repudiated monument and the art that repudiates it. The confrontation is absorbed by that which limits it, where the confrontation of the world based in poetry sacrifices itself and is saved. The doors of the stela open so that poetry can return to a space in conflict; some underground poets despise this act; others take advantage of it, while their hosts, Rojo Córdova and the National Council for the Arts and Culture (Conaculta), await them.

NOTES IN NEW DIRECTIONS

We don't know how many poetry readings people—or literature students—go to in a year. Perhaps not all of us should feel attracted to the conflict that poetry causes in what is human. But why not? It seems to me, frankly, that the question is quite unexpected: Why do we not come together in poetry like we do in dance, in song, or in conversation? Why does poetry seem so alien if we learn from a young age how to read, speak, and be interested in pretty words or ugly words?

Poetry out loud contaminates reality more, expands toward it, and recreates geography to discover old paths of orality, languages that visit each other.

Perhaps it's because philosophy and the humanities in general have believed that thinking and language satiate only themselves because they are never found in the dispersion of life and its events. That is, the idea of a tree is more attractive than the tree itself; the idea of love more interesting than love as such; and the idea of a poem more prestigious than that which poetry is directed at.

Álvaro Campos says, "I am a continuous dialogue./An incomprehensible speaking-aloud." And that's what poetry, thought, and language are: a continuous dialogue that seeks to come out to once again find itself in its interior.

The work of each of the collectives and individuals, promoters, and/or creative provocateurs has broadened out literature as a meeting point inside and outside the spaces traditionally occupied by "intellectuals." However, the road still seems long, since both the voice of the readers and the ears of the listeners have to mature through workshops, critiques, more events, and publications.

Enunciating a poem increasingly becomes a wake-up call for those who, coming from vulnerable social groups, take the risk of writing and believing that they see not only in writing, but also in reading, an honest way of accessing the world, of confronting and reconciling with it. This is the opposite of what is shown by the artistic system, whose enunciation continues to be elitist, foreign to how people speak, opaque when it projects feelings, ideas, situations, hardened by the solemn enunciation that belongs to the bureaucracy of the creative system.

There is no precise date or day. Poetry out loud contaminates reality more, expands toward it, and recreates geography to discover old paths of orality, languages that visit each other, to create other underworlds, to recreate itself in the attempt. ■■■

NOTES

¹ A very expensive monument that was not ready on time for the bicentennial festivities. People in Mexico think that all that money could be used for other useful projects with more social impact. [Editor's Note.]