

## An hospitable tambo: a refuge along the journey

by Chiara Bianchessi

Climbing to the second floor of Kunst Meran, the gaze is immediately drawn to a corner transformed into a welcoming refuge. A colorful tapestry, mosaic of fabrics and textures, unfolds into a carpet. On it, soft cushions and carefully arranged books invite the public to take a moment to sit, read, rest, or converse. This is *An imagined friendship (a spiritual tambito)* (2022),<sup>1</sup> the installation by Peruvian artist Eliana Otta.

In Quechua, *tambo* means refuge. The word refers to a resting place, a simple structure under which travelers in the Andes can stop before continuing their journey. In this tambo, Otta brings together two figures: on the left José María Arguedas (1911–1969) and on the right Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004), writing “a quattro mani” on an open book resting on an upside-down globe. The words of Anzaldúa, from the chapter *The Homeland, Aztlán / El otro México*,<sup>2</sup> intertwine with those from Arguedas’s acceptance speech for the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega Prize (Lima, October 1968).<sup>3</sup>

Arguedas, a Peruvian writer, anthropologist and poet, devoted his life to the study of the Quechua language and community. Thanks to him, we know a body of songs and tales collected during his journeys in the Andes, later published in *The Singing Mountaineers. Songs and Tales of the Quechua People*.<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa, a Chicana writer, poet and feminist theorist, fought with her poetry to create intersectional spaces where multiple identities such as hers could exist. The title of the work refers to their meeting as an “imagined friendship,” due to the historical distance separating them, yet also hints at the profound affinities between the two. Scattered across the carpet are several of their books, in different languages and translations.

For both Arguedas and Anzaldúa, language is more than an abstract code of communication: it is a terrain of encounter and clash, a marker of identity, of cultural intersections, of colonial histories. Arguedas grew up speaking Spanish at home, yet during his childhood he travelled across the Andes with his father and became deeply immersed in Quechua, later dedicating his life to its study.<sup>5</sup> In his acceptance speech he described himself as:

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<sup>1</sup> The work was first installed in the group exhibition *Learning from plants, rocks and waters*, held at SOHO STUDIOS in Vienna together with Imayna Caceres, Hansel Sato, and Alfredo Ledesma.

<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa, G., *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Fifth Edition, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, CA, 1999 (1<sup>a</sup> ed. 1987)

<sup>3</sup> The speech is included in: Arguedas, J. M., *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, Caracas, Fundación Editorial El Perro y la Rana, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The Quechua songs included in the work were collected by José María Arguedas, who transcribed them directly as they were sung in Quechua and later translated them into Spanish. Similarly, the threshing songs of Angasmayo were collected and translated from Huanca (a Quechua dialect) into Spanish by María Lourdes Valladares. The Quechua tales, on the other hand, were initially collected by Father Jorge A. Lira and then translated into Spanish by Arguedas. The translation of the tales from Spanish into English was carried out by Kate and Angel Flores, while the songs and essays were translated into English by Ruth Stephan.

<sup>5</sup> Arguedas J. M., *The Singing Mountaineers. Songs and Tales of the Quechua People*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1957, p.27

“[...] un peruano que orgullosamente, como un demonio feliz habla en cristiano y en indio, en español y en quechua. Deseaba convertir esa realidad en lenguaje artístico y tal parece, según cierto consenso más o menos general, que lo he conseguido.”<sup>6</sup>

Anzaldúa, too, lived between languages. Her mother tongue, Chicano Spanish, is defined by her as “[...] a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.”<sup>7</sup> and again as “[a language] for a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English [...]”.<sup>8</sup>

In a world increasingly defined by rigid borders, both authors confronted these barriers throughout their lives, choosing to resist rather than submit. Anzaldúa wrote in a “crossing of languages”,<sup>9</sup> Spanish, Náhuatl and English, without translating and without translating herself. She refused to be confined within categories that did not belong to her and inevitably diminished her. Instead, she compelled her readers to face a *mezcla*<sup>10</sup> of languages which might surprise or unsettle, but ultimately represents the complexity of her identity.

Her poetry becomes a bridge linking cultures, a space where complexity is allowed to exist. Similarly, Arguedas declared his attempt to:

“[...] convertir en lenguaje escrito lo que era como individuo: un vínculo vivo, fuerte, capaz de universalizarse, de la gran nación cercada y la parte generosa, humana, de los opresores. El vínculo podía universalizarse, extenderse; se mostraba un ejemplo concreto, actuante. El cerco podía y debía ser destruido; el caudal de las dos naciones se podía y debía unir.”<sup>11</sup>

Arguedas confronted the “wall” erected around the Quechua people, a wall built to control them, administer them, observe them from a distance “con repugnancia o curiosidad.”<sup>12</sup> He nevertheless climbed over it, giving voice to a people who had until then been narrated only by the “victors,” and used his own experience to leap beyond it.

It is therefore significant that, in a world where new walls are constantly raised to halt and categorize people, these two authors, who spent their lives struggling to overcome them, are

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<sup>6</sup> “[...] a Peruvian who proudly, like a happy demon, speaks in Christian and in Indian, in Spanish and in Quechua. I wished to transform that reality into artistic language and it seems, according to a more or less general consensus, that I have succeeded.” Translation from: Arguedas J.M., acceptance speech for the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega Prize, 1968

<sup>7</sup> Anzaldúa, G., *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Fifth Edition, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, CA, 1999 (1<sup>a</sup> ed. 1987), p. 48

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem

<sup>9</sup> English translation of Zaccaria P., *La lingua che ospita. Poetiche Politiche Traduzioni*, Milano, Meltemi editore, 2017, p.195

<sup>10</sup> *Mezcla*: “mixture, blend”

<sup>11</sup> “[...] transform into written language what I was as an individual: a living, strong bond, capable of universalization, between the besieged great nation and the generous, human part of the oppressors. That bond could be universalized, extended; it presented itself as a concrete, active example. The siege could and should be broken; the flow of the two nations could and should unite.” Translation from: Arguedas J.M., acceptance speech for the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega Prize, 1968

<sup>12</sup> “with repugnance or curiosity.” Translation from: Arguedas J.M., acceptance speech for the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega Prize, 1968

represented and sheltered in a tambo: a temporary refuge for those on the road, into which viewers themselves are invited to enter.

The image of the tent as a site of hospitality also appears in Antonio Prete's *All'ombra dell'altra lingua. Per una poetica della traduzione*: "In translation, the words of my language were like the tents of the nomad who hosts: shaken by the wind, uncertain, yet, as far as they could, welcoming."<sup>13</sup> Prete's words are emblematic, describing the tent as hospitable precisely in its uncertainty and impermanence. Shaken by the wind, its borders are not fixed but mobile and unstable; it is built only to shelter for a night after a day's journey, to be dismantled the following morning as everyone sets out again.

And yet, despite its precariousness, it opens itself to those who, like us, are on the move: "This is perhaps the most ancient figure of hospitality. The nomad is hospitable because he knows the meaning of being on the road, of being exposed along the way."<sup>14</sup> Otta has done precisely this, opening her colorful *tambito* which becomes, in every sense, a space where hospitality unfolds on multiple levels.

As a *tambo*, it is by nature a refuge welcoming visitors, the two authors, and their books. Within those books, written in different languages, the word, whether poetry or prose, becomes the place where their identities are received. Across the different translations, the otherness carried by each language is respected and given room. Those who enter this protected space read of "forked tongues," of oral traditions, of languages that resisted colonial power and survived; they read of walls and bridges, of living borders, of complexity, conflict and encounter.

Otta's *tambo* thus becomes a space where otherness, what Édouard Glissant called "opacity",<sup>15</sup> the irreducible singularity of the two authors, their writings, their languages, and of those who choose to dwell in the work, can exist. The installation invites us to pause, to enter into dialogue with the proposed readings and, at best, to resume our journey with a renewed awareness.

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<sup>13</sup> English translation of Prete A., *All'ombra dell'altra lingua. Per una poetica della traduzione*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri editore, 2011, p.15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem

<sup>15</sup> English translation of Glissant É., *Poetica della traduzione. Poetica III*, Macerata, 2019, pp.127-135

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