

Cecilia Vicuña

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Rodrigo Toscano



# WHERE GLACIERS MEET THE SEA

a conversation

CV Cecilia Vicuña  
RT Rodrigo Toscano

RT Cecilia, early this November, you and I had a very invigorating conversation on a park bench in Union Square, New York City. To our delighted surprise, we both reveled in each other's recent pedagogical acts—in your case, poetic interventions, and in my case, concrete-political field practices. Also, we agreed that we could easily reverse whose definitional doings were whose in terms of vision and intent.

One thing I remember you expressing was your deep concern and overt (out in public) wrangling with what you described as a bullying by contemporary global capitalist culture on youths' ability to connect with 'suppressed' oral poetic traditions. Now, you and I have known each other for over twelve years, and you know that I am deeply anti-metaphysical in orientation, poetically and politically. Frankly, your comment, coming from almost anyone else, might have well set me on collision course with any notion of the 'suppression of oral' *whatever*. But then you related several instances as a radical anthropologist *slash* community organizer *slash* punk, random, deep witch from hell might—which, well, greatly intrigued me!

Could you please, here, now (for those of us locked into all our global workaday *realities*) relate some recent experiences you've had with 'liberating' oral poetic 'powers' in youth?

CV Yeah! Several things come to mind. A few years ago I was attending a performance of *King Lear* at The Globe, the Shakespearean theater in London, and during the intermission, women minstrel poets began singing while they mixed with the audience. A little leaflet described how, in Elizabethan times, the last of these women poets were hanged, because they sang 'truth to power.' Free speech was dangerous then, as it is now, so they killed this powerful oral poetic tradition. Now switch to Chile. Since the arrival of the Spaniards, the indigenous oral shaman/poets, who worked as miners, peasants and fishermen created a powerful resistance, or counter poetics movement, which consisted of singing improvised poems during religious ceremonies. For 500 years the Catholic Church and Chilean society did everything to stop them, but their vibrant mystical/political art, continued unabated. That is to say, until now, when it is fast disappearing because the globalized economy has destroyed the independent livelihood of miners, peasants and fishermen. If you add the global reach of TV and videogames, you get teenagers who are ashamed of their fathers, and do not care for their poetics. The kids don't even know what speaking 'truth to power' means. They have been brainwashed into thinking that poetry is

boring. I became aware of this and immediately moved in to counter the slow death of this tradition.

I began in 1995 by storming a school in the mountains, disguised as a sculpture or toy, wailing, singing and playing with the children as if we had all become wild animals. And all this in the presence of the school principals—who expected a bona fide *maestra* to arrive from Santiago! In no time, we were all dancing and feasting on the liberated power of communal joy. But then, to unleash their ability to speak—that’s a different matter. It has been a slow, continuous process of many workshops because the school system and the whole community are against speaking up, are against poetry and the idea of justice. The new, dominant social orientation is to make money, to simply adapt to the ‘modern ways.’ Or is it? The new student movement in Chile is rising up against that model, and they have mobilized a million and a half people in the streets of Chile to demand an end to the culture of profit. A new oral dimension is emerging within this rebellion and my intent is to bridge the energy of that political urban movement with the poetic tradition that raises to prominence the oral poetic dimensions of knowledge. More than ever, we need it to go on!

RT A cross-connection of alienated spheres of the social metabolic, yeah, totally. The Chilean student movement of the last year has been a *massive* global event. Tuning in to that is key. The recent Italian student movement (14-N) has been pivotal too, and before that, the Spanish (15-M), the Quebecois (Classe) and Mexican (Yo Soy 132) movements. The effects of Occupy-inspired actions here in the U.S. and across the globe have been significant. While many American poetry ‘craft’ profs have been bullied into their specific (degraded) industrial regime requirements for the ‘betterment’ of individual poems, all these other incredibly rich poetic landscapes are being created, almost daily.

One thing that has always struck me about your poetic on-site actions (many now documented in the riveting festschrift *Spit Temple*) has been your complete commitment to the multiple dimensions of ‘site’—the people assembled, the physical dimensions of the reading site, the time of day, the ideological *climate* of that very week, etc. All these dimensions of the reading-moment get addressed in such a way that the performative *distribution* of a politics (not just the ‘content’ or ‘form’ of a particular poem) is what people experience. There’s also a kind of ‘hidden’ quality about the process. It appears that the pre-semantic dimension of

your poetics is as important as the fully ‘present’ word. That honing in on a *single* word—in any language, can be a first act in the search for wide social meaning. How does this atomic oral-distributive quality of your performances fit into your overall social vision?

CV I can tell you a story: in 1984, at the height of the dictatorship in Chile, I was living in Buenos Aires, feeling sad and impotent. Suddenly I saw this word emerge, sprout as a bean in my mindscape. Not a word, only a particle: ‘com’, as in *compassion*, or *compañero*, the *com* in the commons re-emerging as a pulsation. I wrote in my notebook: “an unknown word, a new form is coming to life: ‘la convivencia y la conmoción.’” These words don’t easily translate into English. They mean being able to live together, feeling what the other feels. I put away the note and told no one about it. A few days later, the first manifestation against the dictatorship took place in Chile, the first rising of the collective force that had been suppressed. Now, what is the connection between the power pushing the particle ‘com’ into a helix (as I drew it years later for *Instan*), and the collective rage of a people dispossessed of their rights? You know, people used to address each other as ‘com-pañero’ before being crushed. I think there is an emotional field that cuts through time-space, a deep

longing for justice at the core of language itself. If the ancient poets that coined these words were coming from that same field, then any word can be a time-space vehicle, communicating many spheres at once.

Now, as to the ‘multiple dimensions’ of ‘site.’ I have been working for a long time on a series of poems and translations of a Yaqui poem of the Sonoran desert. For the Yaqui, space and place are ‘states of being.’ In other words, ‘sites’.

Dimensions are forms of awareness: you see them when you are aware (a notion that matches the quantum view of the non-local). You, Rodrigo, might see them because you are a poet and activist, and also a person who, as a youth, actually traveled the desert as a truck driver through many dimensions.

Poetry lives at the edge, bridging the known and the unknown. For me, the qualities of the ‘real’ *are* the unknown. I think this multidimensionality is perceived as a threat to the linear mindset, and it’s the reason why my work (and that of many poets) has been overlooked. A conceptual framework to deal with the fluidity of the oral mind is missing. The oral is not something exotic or remote, it is right here, within us all, as unrecognized or forgotten potential. McLuhan saw it and said the digital age would bring back the oral. For me, the ongoing

tension between the oral/written creates a more vivid picture of who we are. Rosa Alcalá, I think created an excellent framework in her introductory essay to *Spit Temple*, when she asked, “what is this woman doing?” Something happens even before you read it! That’s how I came to my poetics, by *staying* in the question, even as I perform today. Again, the key aspect to this art is *not* knowing, opening up to the possibilities of the moment, to ‘las combinatorias.’

I sometimes call these combinations, ‘quasars,’ events of pure potential, where nothing is planned and all is about to happen. But it is not plain improvisation. It is far more complex than that; there is a setting of a field of intentions, where the work of a lifetime can intervene. David Hinton, writes of this process as pure ‘generative energy,’ a term from the old Taoist philosophy of China. That body of thought really resonates with me. I actually had read the Tao Te Ching as a teenager in Chile, and it influenced me deeply. I recognized in its lines our own way of being (by the way, the Tao Te Ching is also an oral poem, probably composed by women). At the time (mid 1960s), oral cultures were still running strong in Chile. You could have the double experience of hearing the poets sing, and you could read as well. Poetry embodied this double power. Plus, I spent

a lot of time walking about the mountains. As the Chinese say, “these mountains know a lot.” One day, facing the mountains at night, I experienced words, each single word as an explosion of consciousness. I was 18 years old, and I laughed so hard that I woke people in the other room. I laughed understanding that consciousness and language were one, mirroring each other, playing with each other through us. This was all happening in 1966, in the context of a fantastic revolutionary wave sweeping the whole of Latin America, from Brazil to Chile.

RT Cecilia, even the most skeptical, analytical, ‘materialist realist’ poets I’ve met seem to weave self-enabling myths about their artistic development. And yours are so rife with luminous epiphanies! I am really surprised by this stream of reflective moments that call out to other moments, decades apart, seamlessly making one rich tapestry of both tragedy and joyous renewal. But these moments also arise out of the specific conditions that you’ve lived in.

I am wondering, is there anything in your family background that was also formative to your social-political thinking? And were those influences what brought you to the poetics that compel you to this day?

CV Thinking of how I came to it, I now see many tragedies compressed into my little body,

tragedies which opened me up to experience the atomic vision of words. It was back in 1960s, in Chile, at the foot of the 'eternal snows,' as we used to call them, the glaciers that are now melting fast. But to get there, I have to give you a little background. I was born in one of the few intervals of peace in Chile. Just before my birth, there had been brutal social struggles, and my grandfather, Carlos Vicuña Fuentes, had been in prison, or in exile many times because of his fight for civil rights. When I was growing up his home became 'un cenáculo,' a salon for political cultural debate. Every Sunday refugees from the Spanish Civil War and Chilean writers and intellectuals met, and talked for hours. And we, the children, heard them. The feeling in the room was of such passion for social justice, that any sacrifice people made for it was nothing. What was at stake was the well-being of all, and this idea penetrated deeply into my veins. It seems to me I was being trained by the power of this emotion, mixed in with great fun, shouting and drinking, pushing the children away, and us, crawling back into the rooms, unnoticed to hear some more. I remember when 'Vicuña' (my grandpa) spoke in public and huge crowds gathered to hear him. I think he orally composed his speeches, and I remember hearing not only the

words, but also how the crowd literally vibrated, responded physically to his call for justice. Everything was alive, the light outside, the smell in the room, the collective feeling of oneness. The idea of a separate 'I', of a 'self' unconnected to the cosmos and the social struggles of the people was just not there for us. Being alive was being part of this multidimensional ocean of beauty and pain. And there was a lot of poetry in our lives. My grandfather was a writer and a publisher. Neruda and Gabriela Mistral were his personal friends. He also published Vicente Huidobro. I read *Altazor* and *Temblor de Cielo* in these pocket book editions he made when I was 14 years old. I slept with these books under my pillow, and I experienced the act of reading as I experienced the wild oral speeches. Both were journeys into the Whole Shebang. Huidobro says an Aymara native in Bolivia transmitted his vision of words to him. But for me, it is right there, in the memory of the land, the poetics of this majestic place where the glaciers meet the sea.

Afterward

RT Cecilia, since you and I last spoke, a series of mass psychosocial revealing moments have transpired in Chile, specifically around the

enduring effects of the Dictatorship. How have these events changed the way in which your work is received in Chile?

CV Yes! I've just returned from Chile where I presented my new/old book of erotic poetry censored in 1973, *El Zen Surado* and my show *Artists for Democracy: The Archives of Cecilia Vicuña*, to memorialize an international mobilization of artists for the resistance in Chile of which I was a co-founder in 1974. It was a powerful, emotional moment to bring forth two erased stories in the context of the commemorations of the military coup that deposed Salvador Allende in 1973. These two events generated many gatherings, performances and public conversations where people pondered why my works had been erased for 40 years, and what made them relevant today. Young poets and artists asked great questions, what caused them to be repressed for so long? As we talked, a beautiful acknowledgement of the collective trauma that covered over my work began to emerge. In truth, as we were saying, after 2011, when millions of high school and university students rallied in protest all over the country, along with parents, grandparents and teachers, a new conversation began in Chile. *Un destape*—a lifting of a veil of shame. As a result, during 2013 many people were able,

for the first time in 40 years, to speak openly in the workplace and on TV and the press of the pain of torture and displacement. So my book and exhibition arrived on fertile ground. And yet, they offered new angles to go deeper into these questions. Today, the censored poems I wrote in the '60s seem innocent and mild, but at the time they outraged left and right, Marxists and Catholics, because they exude a cosmic eroticism that does not depend on male dominance. In other words, their innocence and playfulness made them uncontrollable, as if the free female body and tongue, her language, threatened the foundations of a hypocritical society based on the suppression of indigenous cultures and women. As I read and performed my ancient poems to small crowds in Santiago and Valparaiso I could see the exalted joy in their faces. It's as if a secret had been let out and a wild creature had entered the room for them to play with and caress.

RT The world keeps moving—that's for sure. One of the peculiar, no, infuriating aspects about the North American avant-garde scene is that—well, to use our previous metaphor—'glacial' movements in the social get written as landslides, and landslides as glacial micro movement. Now, those offset calculations could be valid *if* there's a measurement of the

world's itself—straight out, no pre-aestheticized cool sunglasses. I mean to say that textures, dynamic textures, in works of art aren't sensed in time (or *under* time is another way to put). Few people say, "hey, this poetic here—is going to fully unpack later, and I can sense it, and that negative space is how I read things." A statement like this is too often read as metaphysical, though it's a fully material thing to think and say. They're (we're) stuck on *current accomplishments*, rather than arrays of difficult time- offset readings. Hey—so, I know that you've been through long periods of critical and popular neglect of your artwork. Can you give us an example?

CV Oh my goodness, yes. It's not like all of a sudden my work has found a place in Chile. On the contrary, during this trip I learned that after my new show, *El Mercurio*, the main newspaper, has me on a blacklist: artists that can't be written about. Of course, I am honored to be on that list!

You see, in a way, Chile continues to be at the forefront of the war of ideas, because the student movement is not only about getting free education, it is a questioning of the system itself. The young don't want 'to be like them', and this gutsy philosophical stance empowers us all. It is not by chance that the story of Artists for Democracy (AFD) has resurfaced in

this framework. I was studying art in London when the military coup in Chile occurred. As you know, my book *Sabor a Mi*, came out a few weeks after the coup, thereby converting into a first response to the horror. I became a public speaker and co-founded AFD to gather support for the Chilean resistance. The movement took hold in no time, and artists from all over the world joined us and donated works for a big Arts Festival we organized in October 1974. AFD also took part in what people say is the biggest rally in the history of London: on the first anniversary of the military coup, September 15, 1974, 10,000 people gathered in Trafalgar Square, in the rain, to hear Hortensia Bussi, Allende's widow, and the representatives of the British Labor movement supporting the resistance. It was an unforgettable, magnificent moment.

RT I hear you about lists—formal and informal. What we have here in the U.S. are endless *gray* lists! Political artists risk dropping dead from endless crooked-smile soft approbation with *zero* forums from which to conduct content. That event in Trafalgar Square, I know it through British Labor History, which is part of world history, of course. And I bet you that even that incomparable moment met its institutional resistance—for decades, no?

CV Ha! You're right. The story of this mobilization by artists never made it into the record, neither in London, nor in Chile. It was forgotten, and only mentioned as an aside, a footnote or a two liner in a couple of English books. I, of course, kept the records in my personal archives for all this time, precariously saving them, as I moved from country to country in my exile. And now, this precious cargo has seen the light, for the first time at the *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) and the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (National Museum of Fine Arts) in Santiago. The show opened a few days after Michelle Bachelet had been reelected to the presidency, promising to address the plight of the students, the indigenous and the environmental movement. People say *veremos*, we shall see. Her previous record was not the best. She allowed the destruction of the glaciers by foreign mining companies and persecuted the Mapuche, as the military had done before her. On opening night, we gathered at the immense plaza in front of the museum, and I sang my lament for the forgotten beauty of the people of Santiago, who countered the violence of the CIA and the Chilean Right in the 1970s by organizing a massive peaceful movement that sustained Chile's independence until 1973.

After the performance, we moved upstairs to the gallery spaces where the threads of my quipus intertwined our bodies with the art donated to Chile by artists around the world. Through the quipu you could see the *Cloud of the Disappeared*, a huge wall with hundreds of photos of the disappeared which forms part of the permanent installation of the museum. In that setting, I did another performance: two young girls held tablets to their chests, spouting a video protesting the planned destruction of the glaciers that feed the valleys of Central Chile and Santiago.



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