may-poré : A Linguistic Sculpture

Rachel Berwick's installation at the Wooster Gardens Gallery in New York was in place from November of 1997 to January of 1998. During the annual meeting of the ELF last January, members were invited to visit, and Rachel herself graciously made room in her schedule to be there in person. The following review was written by Dennis Holt.

In the index to some imaginary comprehensive encyclopedia of the known universe, in the range between "maypole" and "may queen", one would find the name "Maypure". However, I was not able to find it in the index to my set of the 14th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Maypure, a South American language of the Arawakan family, seems to have disappeared sometime during the 19th century, leaving very few traces.

On the most detailed maps of northern South America, the name is still there, however, as "Maipures" (from earlier San José de Maypures), the name of a town near the confluence of the Tuparro river with the Orinoco, on the Colombian side of the larger river, which there forms the border between Colombia and Venezuela.

According to what is almost certainly an apocryphal account, the great explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt, during his search for the source of the Orinoco in 1801, encountered a group of Carib Indians who had recently attacked and exterminated a neighboring tribe — in some accounts a Maypure group — and captured some of their domesticated parrots. The parrots still spoke words of the now extinct language and provided the only oral record of that vanished tongue — parrots as primordial acoustic recording-instruments. He acquired one of the parrots and transcribed what he could of its vocabulary.

Having become intrigued by the story of Humboldt and his bird consultant, Rachel Berwick, a professor of sculpture at Yale University in New Haven, acquired two Amazon parrots and, "with help of a linguist, a bird-behaviorist, and a philosopher of language who specializes in animal psychology", trained them to speak words from Maypure, a language that Humboldt mentions in the narrative of his adventures on the upper Orinoco. She then custom-designed and built an artistically conceived enclosure in which to house and display the birds. Her resulting artwork, "may-poré" , was recently exhibited at the Real Art Ways Gallery in Hartford. It was also shown subsequently at the Wooster Gardens Gallery on lower Broadway in New York City’s Soho District.

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Obituary—Floyd Lounsbury

It is with immense sadness that we must report the death of our friend and colleague, Floyd Lounsbury, on May 14th, 1998. Although he had been in poor health for over a year, his indomitable spirit and active research agenda led us to believe that he would pull through. His passing is a great loss to colleagues in many fields.

Floyd was born in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, April 25, 1914. He served as a master sergeant in the 22nd weather squadron of the Army Air Forces during World War II. He was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin with a B.A. degree in mathematics in 1941 and an M.A. in anthropology in 1947; he received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1949 in anthropology and an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1987. He began teaching at Yale University in 1947, retiring in 1979 as a Sterling Professor.

A scholar in his many fields, he made outstanding contributions to linguistic theory and the study of American Indian Languages, of Mayan hieroglyphic writing and of kinship systems. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Floyd was the first person to agree to be on the Board of the ELF. Without his unflagging support, the Fund would probably never gotten off the ground. His vast knowledge and sensible approach to language issues was a great help and will be sorely missed. Floyd requested that memorial contributions be made to the Endangered Language Fund, Dept. of Linguistics, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520.
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From the outside — really the only part that the viewer could actually see — Berwick's artwork reminded me mostly of a large cylindrical Japanese or Chinese screen, onto which had been painted, in varying shades of gray, the silhouettes of branches and leaves and a pair of perching parrots. From inside this very special aviary, a taped recording of parrot-sounds kept up a sporadic chatter that provided the work with an auditory aspect even when the live birds were not in the mood for speaking, which was indeed the case when ELF President Doug Whalen and I visited the exhibit one afternoon last year. During our visit to the New York installation of the work some months later, the live birds did speak a bit, though it was difficult to discern the precise phonetic quality of their output.

Those silhouettes had not actually been painted on the outer surface of the aviary, but were being projected by a central light-source onto its white translucent material. And, in an odd way, the sounds we heard from the parrots were also like shadows or projections of what had once been real words in the mouths of real human speakers.

Berwick's point seems to be, at least in part, that her parrots, in speaking the Maypure words, somehow resonate with those legendary parrots who, in her words "could be the sole and imperfect conduit through which an entire tribe's existence could be traced."

Jan Avgikos, the author of the program-notes for Berwick's exhibition in Hartford, claims that the most directly attributable source of the story of Humboldt and his parrot was the British novelist W.H. Hudson, who recounts it somewhere in his own writings, though it is not clear whether he actually names the language that the parrot spoke.

Humboldt's own written account of his experiences in the territory of the Maypures does not mention the parrots or any attack on a Maypure village. Humboldt does, however, provide a short comparative vocabulary of Maypure and a putatively related tongue, Parenti. He states that "The Maypure tongue is still spoken at Atures [the next major settlement downstream from Maypures and now the capital of the Venezuelan state of Amazonas], although the mission is inhabited only by Guahibos and Macos."

While Maypure thus does seem to have been a viable language at the time of his visit, nevertheless Humboldt does allude to the fact that Maypure was even then losing ground in that region: "At Maypures the Guareken and Parenti tongues only are now spoken. From the Rio Anaveni, which falls into the Orinoco north of Atures, as far as beyond Jao, and to the mouth of the Guaviare (between the fourth and sixth degrees of latitude), we everywhere find rivers, the termination of which, veni, recalls to mind the extent to which the Maypure tongue heretofore prevailed. Veni, or weni, signifies water, or a river."

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Announcements

REMINDER — AudioForum Discount

Supporting and Sustaining members are reminded that they are entitled to a 20% discount on 77 less commonly taught language courses offered by AudioForum. If you would like the list of languages, or would just like to know if a particular one is eligible, please mail or e-mail (elf@haskins.yale.edu) us, and we will give you the information. We are extremely grateful for this offer from AudioForum. Please take advantage of this benefit of belonging to the Endangered Language Fund.

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Discount Offer From Cambridge University Press

A special discount offer from Cambridge University Press is enclosed. These titles are likely to be of interest to members of the Endangered Language Fund. We hope they may assist you in your endeavors.

Job Announcement

Qinghai Junior Teachers' College wishes to hire a teacher of English for the 1998-1999 academic year. Qinghai Junior Teachers' College is located in Xining City, capital of China's Northwest multi-ethnic Qinghai Province. Contact the editor at Matthew.Richardson@yale.edu for more information.

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Humboldt also states, in a note accompanying his Parenti-Maypure wordlist, that, rather than having been elicited from a parrot, "The words of the Maypure language have been taken from the works of Gili and Hervas." I collected the words placed between parentheses from a young Maco Indian, who understood the Maypure language.

Since artists are not scientists, and thus are not held to strict standards of correctness or even truthfulness, they are free to explore territory where more rigorously rational individuals might fear to tread. Whatever the real truth of the situation, the story that Rachel Berwick's artwork represents does seem to involve a believable scenario, one which, even if it did not actually take place in the case of the Maypure, is clearly representative of a possible (or even probable) type of event, something the likes of which might have occurred numerous times during the long, untold history of South American tribes and their languages.

One incontrovertible fact is that the Maypure language is now extinct, whatever the actual reasons for its extinction, and Rachel Berwick's parrots seem to be, as far as I know, the only beings on the planet who still produce Maypure-like vocabularies on a daily basis. This, in itself, is significant, especially if we remind ourselves, once again, that we are in the realm of art here, not that of history or of linguistic science.

In her own notes to her artwork, Berwick says, "My work is about loss and the inevitable attempt to recover that which is lost." She then invites the viewer, while contemplating the entire conjunction of legend and shadows and voices, "to reflect on the imperfection of memory, the permanence of loss, and our desire to recover that which is gone." To these might be added, in parallel fashion, the imperfection of cultural transmission and our desire to retain or record that which is disappearing: such are the factors that figure in the attempts of the Endangered Language Fund and other sympathetic institutions to save, in as many ways as possible, as much as possible of the linguistic legacy of this planet that has been so fertile and prolific, not merely in the realms of plant and animal life, but here also, in the realm of language, where humans have come to name the birds and the trees.

1Her reasons for spelling the name as she has have not been reported.

2This probably corresponds to the language that Loukotka calls Parenti, which he says was spoken somewhat farther up the Orinoco, south of the area of the Maypures. He classifies both languages as Arawakan and states that both are extinct.

3The quotations from Humboldt are from an English translation of his principal account of his South American explorations: Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America... translated and edited by Thomasina Ross and published in London in 1852.

4Humboldt is here referring to two works of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: Saggio di storia americana... (in four volumes) by Filippo Salvadori Gilij, published in Rome from 1780 to 1784; and Catálogo de las lenguas de las naciones conocidas, y numeración, división, y clases de éstas según la diversidad de sus idiomas y dialectos (in six volumes) by Lorenzo Hervas y Panduro, published in Madrid between 1800 and 1805.
Introducing the Minority Course

This past summer 60 young Europeans came together in southern Denmark to discuss the experience of minority groups in Europe. A major goal of the course was for the participants to better understand the range of minority, majority and multicultural societies within Europe and the role of democracy in minority-majority relations. The selection of participants with diverse backgrounds was a crucial part of reaching this goal. Half represented minority and half majority populations in order to include a range of experience and to foster dialogue. The participants came from 18 European countries and represented about 35 different cultures, identities, kinship groups or nations. The region of Schleswig in southern Denmark where most of the program was held served as a successful example of peaceful co-existence between different language-groups.

Since a significant part of the distinction between people groups in Europe is linguistic, one segment of the course addressed the role of language in minority identity and the media in promoting minority languages. A journalist on TV channel Omrop Fryslan spoke of the channel’s significance for Frisian language and culture. The journalist also described the media’s general influence on language and culture and in particular on the Frisian language and identity. Debates were later held on the fate of languages in the future, and participants discussed the importance of the media and the media’s influence on the formation of identity and on less widely distributed languages. Two participants from Slovakia even wrote an article on this subject entitled “Languages Preserve Minority” which can be found on the Internet at http://www.hojoster.dk/eng/d15_12.htm#langu.

More information on the Minority Course is available on the Internet at http://www.hojoster.dk or by emailing hojoster@post4.tele.dk.