Understanding Contact Zones in Peru Through Etymology

In my course "Territories of Desire, Dwelling, and Resistance in Latin America," I've been able to explore my interest in sociolinguistics through a new lens: that of the contact zone. At the beginning of the semester, we read *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*) by the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas. Published in 1958, the novel follows a young boy, Ernesto, as he transitions from a childhood spent moving between Indigenous-majority villages in the Peruvian countryside with his father to living at a boarding school. While Ernesto does not consider himself Indigenous in the same way as the people he meets (he is of mixed Spanish/Indigenous descent,) he has several Indigenous mentor figures throughout his childhood, providing him with a connection to indigenous Andean cultures.

One of the ways in which the novel portrays this connection, as well as conveying the book's general settings of contact zones between Indigenous and colonial communities, is through bilingualism. Quechua, a language indigenous to the Andes, is woven throughout the Spanish-language novel. In an essay for the class, I analyzed a passage in which Ernesto describes Quechuan etymology of words for sounds that ultimately connect to the name of a spinning top toy that becomes important to the plot. The essay is in Spanish; I have translated three body paragraphs for context on the following page. An English version of the passage being analyzed can be found starting on PDF page 81 of Frances Horning Barraclough's translation.

Excerpt of my essay, titled:

Spanish: "*Me recordaba bellos y misteriosos objetos*": La etimología quechua como un archivo de la relación territorio-cultura en *Los ríos profundos*

English: "It reminded me of beautiful and mysterious objects:" Quechuan etymology as an archive of territory-culture relations in *Deep Rivers*

Creating the category of words with the ending *yllu* in response to the sounds of the territory suggests a connection between territory and culture similar to the one that Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar outlines in the article *"Culture Sits in Places."* Escobar affirms a deep connection between a place and the culture(s) that emerge from its inhabitants, writing that "cultural models and knowledge are based on historical, linguistic, and cultural processes that, while never isolated from broader histories, nevertheless retain certain place specificity;" mechanisms and practices such as "boundaries, classifications, representations, cognitive apprehensions, and spatial relations" are also specific to their place (Escobar 152). In this context, naming elements of the territory such as sound and light offers a starting point for forming territory-specific cultural narratives through language. For example, the *yllu* ending arises from the sounds of the wings of non-human animal species that live in this territory, and thus creates a linguistic category unique to the place. Consequently, *yllu* gives a certain meaning and connotation to the beings, instruments, and practices it names, which comes from the particular territory. As *yllu* describes a type of sound that connotes a certain magic, the community privileges music that seems to belong to the category, ultimately producing a direct connection between the beings of the territory and their cultural practices.

Ernesto's reaction to hearing the word *zumbayllu* for the first time similarly reflects Escobar's argument. The cultural classifications created through the etymology of *yllu* provoke an immediate feeling of enchantment; Ernesto wonders, "'What could the *zumbayllu* be? What could this word name, whose ending reminded me of beautiful and mysterious objects?'" (Arguedas 240). The rationale of the ending in the Quechua language creates a foundation for perceiving and understanding new information. Ernesto narrates a series of associations that follow: the dancer called *Tankayllu*; the insect from which it takes its name; and the sound of the *pinkuyllu* instrument. As he listens to the song of the spinning top, he repeats the word *zumbayllu*; "and it brought joy to repeat this word, so similar to the name of the sweet insects that disappeared singing in the light" (241). The magic of his first encounter with the *zumbayllu* does not come solely from the experience of play, but also from the magic of the *yllu* sound and its connections with other elements of the territory considered magical, mysterious, and beautiful.

Although these connections affirm a unique relationship between the Quechua language and the territory, the word *zumbayllu* also bears the mark of a Spanish presence. On one hand, the deep connection between Quechua and the territory can be seen as an affirmation of the

necessity of indigenous Andean culture's continued existence in its place of origin. However, Abancay is also a contact zone, a mixture of colonial institutions and structures—such as the school and the bridge—with Indigenous communities that maintain indigenous Andean traditions, practices, and influences. The history of *yllu* documents how the territory has influenced the Quechua language and Indigenous culture, but another history of language and culture is presented in the word *zumbayllu*. *Zumbayllu* is composed of the ending *yllu* and the Spanish word *zumbar*, a combination of two different ways of understanding and naming similar sounds. The word itself is an encounter of two cultures, just as the object *zumbayllu* manages to unite the boarding school students. Playing with the *zumbayllu* presents a form of play that is not violent and allows Ernesto to cross the social boundaries created by the boarding school students, which at times are dictated by their ethnic identities.

After primarily working with Romance languages, it was an enriching experience to step outside of my sphere of knowledge through thinking about an indigenous language that uses different etymological logics. When I first began writing the essay, I was planning to emphasize the idea that the book's exploration of language as a place-making practice was a way of affirming that Quechua is the most important language to understand the territory, and therefore that Quechua speakers were the only ones who truly "belonged" in it. Although I still took away the fact that Quechua etymology and Ernesto's use of it to make sense of his environment are manifestations of the deep connection between place and culture, as well as the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to their territory, a conversation with my professor deepened my thinking. She pointed out that although the use of Spanish in the territory is a colonial institution, the territory is now a contact zone, meaning both languages are necessary to understand it.

As I analyzed the passage more deeply, I discovered that the key to my paper was right there, in the word *zumbayllu* itself. While my intention was to analyze the passage through a strictly decolonial lens, more deeply understanding the setting of the contact zone required making room for the idea that place-making practices change alongside major shifts like colonization. Ultimately, ignoring the fact that Spanish was also required to understand the

significance of the spinning top would have been an oversimplification of the book's arguments; by avoiding this oversimplification, I felt I was able to truly synthesize these new concepts in a nuanced way.