Harry Walker

Documents as displaced voice: writing among Amazonian Urarina

Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

Documents as Displaced Voice: Writing among Amazonian Urarina

By

Harry Walker

ABSTRACT

Despite apparently low levels of literacy, Urarina people of Peruvian Amazonia engage enthusiastically with written documents. Focusing on their performative qualities, or what documents 'do', this article explores their use and appropriation in relation to local ideologies of language and power. While serving an important role in linking people to the Peruvian state and its highly bureaucratic political culture, it is argued that documents are especially valued, and deemed capable of extending personal influence and persuasive power, because of three overlapping capacities or tendencies. They displace or delegate voice and detach it from agency, thus constructing an image of a distant or even transcendental authority; they transduce across semiotic modalities, suggesting the mediation of relations with non-phenomenal worlds; and they fix discourse, hinting at the possibility of permanence in a fluid social environment.

KEYWORDS: Amazonia, bureaucracy, documents, literacy, orality, writing

RESUMEN

Aunque los niveles de alfabetización sean aún bajos en la Amazonía, los Urarina del Perú emplean documentos con frecuencia y entusiasmo. Este artículo explora el uso y apropiación de documentos escritos en relación a ideologías locales del lenguaje y del poder, focalizándose en sus cualidades performativas, es decir, en lo que los documentos 'hacen'. A pesar de que el uso de documentos escritos cumple un rol importante conectando la población al Estado peruano y su burocratizada cultura política, aquí se argumenta que para los Urarina, los documentos son especialmente valorizados por su capacidad de extender influencia personal y poder persuasivo gracias a tres capacidades/tendencias que se sobreponen. Los documentos desplazan o delegan la voz separándola de la agencia, construyendo, por tanto, una imagen de autoridad distante o trascendente. Asimismo, éstos transforman y transfieren a través de diversas modalidades semióticas, sugiriendo la mediación de relaciones con mundos no-fenomenales. Por último, los documentos fijan el discurso, evocando permanencia en un ambiente social fluido.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Amazonia, burocracia, documentos, alfabetismo, oralidad, escritura

An engagement with writing in one form or another has deep historical roots for many Amazonian peoples, and such engagements are an increasingly important part of everyday life. Today, a significant majority are active participants in the production as well as consumption of written documents of various kinds, from relatively 'personal' letters or invitations to impersonal or formal requests for government assistance.

Over the past couple of decades, since their settlement in officially designated 'Native Communities', the Peruvian Urarina are one of many such peoples who have been drawn in to a literate and bureaucratic political culture that has remarkably long historical roots: for while writing and literacy might be described as 'restricted' (Goody 1968) or 'incipient' (Besnier 1995) within Urarina communities, it has been argued that the notarial arts of sixteenth-century Spain lie at the root of Latin American identity (Gonzáles Echevarría 1990).[1] Urarina today are active and even enthusiastic participants in this legalistic culture of documentation, despite the fact that the vast majority of adults would be designated illiterate by the typical outside observer, and despite their geographic and social distance from centers of power. While forming a crucial part of state apparatuses of domination, bureaucracy and documents are also actively appropriated by Urarina into their cultural repertoire, in ways that invite us to take them seriously as an important part of contemporary material culture—as 'artefacts of knowledge' (Riles 1999), infused by deeply rooted ideas about power and objectification.

As one of the few people in my host community able to write during the time of my fieldwork, I was often asked to help compose documents of various kinds, ranging from messages to family members to formal requests to local officials. It soon became apparent that written notes increasingly take the place of oral messages and where either is possible, writing is often preferred. Take the following example. One of my neighbors, a man named Bolon, had been hoping for years that his son would return to the village. The son had left some time ago to live downstream with the family of his bride, but with the brideservice now completed, Bolon wished for him to return to help him in his old age. One day, before heading off downstream with a few others on some official business, and knowing that he would have the opportunity to speak personally with his son, Bolon asked me to produce a document on his behalf, requesting his son 'to return to live by the side of his father'. He

explained that he had tried talking face to face but with no success, and reasoned that an official document—preferably signed and stamped—would have a better chance of success. Although I had no official seal or stamp, I agreed, and when the travelling party left in their canoes the next day, this was among several documents they were carrying with them, as part of a technical arsenal of instruments of persuasion.

The most well-known commentary on Amazonian peoples' recognition of the power of writing, Lévi-Strauss's 'writing lesson' (1961), describes the ethnographer's involuntary participation in the Nambikwara chief's attempt to increase his authority and prestige among his people. A meeting was arranged with a neighboring group, and when the moment arrived for the two sides to exchange gifts, an 'extraordinary incident' occurred. Having previously taken to crudely mimicking the ethnographer's writing, scribbling on paper given to him by his guests, the chief pretended to read from a list the presents to be exchanged between the assembled groups. Needless to say, Lévi-Strauss does not treat this as a chance event, but as exemplary of something of universal significance. A discussion of the social and political function of writing soon develops into a theory of writing as, historically, the instrument of alienation and oppression. Without understanding the technology of writing, and thus circumventing the usual long and laborious training, the Nambikwara chief immediately and intuitively grasped its use: a potential for political manipulation that lies at the heart of writing in general (see also Johnson 1997). Writing colonizes and empowers simultaneously, concentrating power in the act of sign making, serving to fix and hierarchize authority through the mere control of written forms—even when those signs do not represent an actual language. More than just an inscribed form of language, writing is a ritual act with a performative dimension.

Derrida's (1976) critical commentary on this episode accuses Lévi-Strauss of naively promulgating a longstanding Western tradition of thought that rejects writing as an inauthentic and alienating medium of communication. Derrida proposes that the classification of the Nambikwara as a 'nonliterate' culture with no writing of their own is based on an overly narrow understanding of writing; he further challenges the image of the chief's exploitation of writing as equivalent to a form of violence inflicted on a hitherto harmonious community, and demonstrates how Lévi-Strauss's own descriptions of the Nambikwara undermined his declaration of their innocence and equality, revealing instead a structural and empirical violence inherent in everyday social life. Indeed, a number of Amazonian scholars have drawn attention to practices of inscription to which writing might be compared, further

implying that it is not necessarily an alien technology without parallel. Clastres (1987), for example, while categorically denying the presence of 'writing' as such, has drawn a parallel between writing and Amerindian forms of torture that use the body as a surface for marking or scarifying, thereby allowing 'society' to inscribe 'the law' on its members. According to Santos Granero (1998), the Yanesha possess a somewhat different kind of 'inscribing practice', in which history is effectively written into the landscape through what he calls 'topographic writing'. Meanwhile, Napo Runa have developed their own forms of textuality in which "cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social, and the surrounding territorial world", thereby transcending simple oppositions between the oral and the textual (Uzendoski 2012: 55). Similarly, a growing number of Andean scholars have in recent years called into question overly simplistic characterizations of rural highlands peoples as exclusively oral, pointing to a deep history of forms of writing that long preceded the arrival of schools and, especially, to the need to recognize alphabetic literacy as just one textual practice among many (e.g. de la Piedra 2009; Rappaport and Cummins 2012; Salomon and Nino-Murcia 2012; Zavala 2002; Zavala et al. 2004).

It has been suggested that writing is assimilated to shamanism in Amazonia, due to its connections with traditional graphic systems (e.g. Albert 1993; Erikson 2004; Gow 1990).[2] In his discussion of Sangama, 'the first Piro who could read', Gow (1990) claims that writing was initially seen by the Piro as equivalent to indigenous graphic designs and could be 'read' by shamans in a similar way. For Sangama and others 'in the know', the paper would turn into a beautiful woman who bears messages, much as happens with snake-like designs after people drink ayahuasca and sing curing songs. Such parallels would seem to hold up well for groups such as the Piro, who today have a strong tradition of graphic design as well as relatively high literacy rates—a result largely due to their enthusiasm for the educational programs of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which began in the 1940s. The Urarina, however, do not possess such a tradition of visual design or glyph making to which writing might be compared. The question also arises as to what we should make of the fact that among groups such as the Urarina the presence of written documents greatly precedes literacy, such that people effectively use and manage documents well before they can read them.

In attempting to move beyond the earlier 'autonomous' model that saw a 'great divide' between literacy and orality, and which ostensibly granted literacy a distinctive, intrinsic character and power to transform individual cognitive processes and social organization in

relatively consistent ways (e.g. Goody 1968; Ong 1982), a number of scholars have emphasized the need to look carefully at how reading and writing are constructed and assimilated in relation to local ideologies of language and other cultural practices (e.g. Besnier 1995; Street 1993).[3] In the case of the Urarina, this may mean, in the first instance, questioning the assumption that written texts are necessarily or even primarily engaged or consumed using visual sense modalities. While 'official' literacy rates may be low, the primary mode of consuming a written document is not reading it or even pretending to, but rather listening to it read aloud by others. The actors who send and receive documents are predominantly mature men who get their school-age children to do the actual reading. Thus, in seeking to understand the role of documents in such societies, we might start by looking not to traditions of inscription or glyph-making but at projected or displaced speech. Writing is a technology of objectifying and delegating voice and detaching it from agency, and is influential for this reason. The apparent fixity or permanence that writing achieves relative to spoken discourse, combined with its capacity to transform words across semiotic modalities—from auditory to visual and back again—through processes of materialization and dematerialization, are similarly crucial for understanding the appeal of documents as well as the contexts in which they are produced and put to use.

The Uses of Documents

The Urarina inhabit the Chambira and Uritoyacu river areas and their tributaries in the Department and Province of Loreto, Peru. Their exact numbers are unclear because many do not possess identity documents and do not appear on any census, but around 5,000 would seem a reasonable estimate, across several dozen communities. They hunt, fish, and practice small-scale subsistence agriculture, and on occasion work short stints for itinerant labor bosses in return for manufactured goods and mass-produced commodities. Spanish is spoken only to outsiders, and only by men—many of whom could be considered bilingual. To the best of my knowledge, the first schools were established in the 1980s with the assistance of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL),[4] which has been instrumental in promoting the bilingual education system still in place today, although many communities did not get schools until much later. The SIL missionaries—active in the region since the 1960s—have been one of the principal avenues, at least in living memory, through which the steady

production of documents came to take on particular significance in Urarina territory. Much earlier, the Jesuits who established a successful mission on the banks of the Chambira in the eighteenth century had intricate documentary practices of their own, as have the several generations of labor bosses and fluvial traders who diligently keep ledgers of outstanding debts in their paper notebooks. All Urarina communities now have a primary school, and although there is a secondary school in the community of San Pedro on the lower banks of the Chambira river, it has few Urarina pupils; the majority of students in residence are from one of the mestizo communities in the area. In 2013 the first cohort of Urarina students to complete secondary school were on the verge of graduating (and unsurprisingly, they seemed somewhat ambivalent about their direction and prospects). Although several generations of Urarina children have now attended primary school, formal education has not been particularly effective in achieving its nominal (state-defined) goals, due largely to the policy of prioritizing native Urarina speakers as teachers and the resulting dearth of qualified staff during this formative early period. The state has had a slowly increasing presence in the region, especially in the form of the school (and, in the past couple of years, conditional cash transfers), but it remains diffuse and distant in most peoples' lives, with a power that is perhaps more imagined than real.

When I arrived to carry out fieldwork in 2005, it was evident that documents of various kinds had a place here, although I learned about their power the hard way.[5] For various reasons, I arrived at the field site alone and without an intermediary to introduce me: I more or less turned up unannounced and uninvited, outlined as best I could the nature of my project, and requested permission to stay. This was immediately and enthusiastically granted, and for a while everything went smoothly. After a month or so, however, rumors began to spread that I was not a student, but a *pelacara*, or 'face peeler', a mythological bogeyman figure much feared in the region and a kind of lowlands version of the somewhat better-known Andean *pishtaco*, said to murder people for their fat or body parts. It was intimated by some that I was on a mission of sorts to kill Urarina people and steal their faces and vital organs, to be sold for a profit in my home country. My denials failed to quash these rumors, and for an anxious couple of days it looked like I would be wise to leave the village and try my luck elsewhere. Then I remembered a somewhat clumsy but typewritten letter of introduction kindly prepared for me by the Iquitos branch of the Peruvian Federation of Indigenous Organizations (AIDESEP), which I had requested several months earlier on the advice of a friend and had forgotten about. I withdrew the smudged letter from the bottom of

my luggage and handed it to the village headman, the *jefe communal*, who examined it carefully with a sense of gravitas, turning it over and examining the letterhead and red stamp over the signature. A crowd gathered round as they noticed the new item. The headman called to his school-aged son, who was handed the document to read aloud to the assembled audience. The letter merely repeated what I had already told people a dozen times, in various different ways, namely, that I was a student researcher from Australia who hoped to learn the Urarina language and way of life. One of the reasons I had forgotten about the letter, no doubt, was that if I really were out to deceive these people, forging it would have been the easiest part of all—infinitely easier than removing one of their faces with a knife. But the letter had an almost immediate effect. People listened intently as the child slowly read the letter, pronouncing every syllable carefully, often restating longer, more complex words after recognizing them towards the end of their enunciation. His father swelled with pride at this demonstration of his son's abilities. Another slightly older lad was then invited to read the letter, and duly did so, twice, easily holding the attention of the audience. From that moment my story was taken seriously; my initial welcome was renewed. I handed over the document, and several months later, a *mestizo* fluvial trader who had visited the community the day after this incident confided to me that he, too, had been asked to read the letter aloud to the entire community some four or five times in a row, while I was not around. Such was my introduction to the culture of official documents; it taught me a lesson I would never forget.

A wide variety of documents are held in high regard by Urarina people. This is closely tied to the bureaucratic political culture of the colonial and postcolonial Latin American nation state, in which the exercise of political power has long been achieved through a combination of oral and written procedures. In Peru, many esteemed documents are associated with the model of bureaucratic authority mandated under the 1974 Law of Native Communities, and so are directly connected with real political power and recognition. This begins with the title document (*titulo*), in which the Native Community is inscribed as a legal entity in possession of a series of rights as well as a particular tract of land. As a material object, it is closely guarded and a source of great anxiety and concern; one dispute over land I witnessed turned largely on the question of who at that time was physically in possession of this document.[6]

Each Native Community must also maintain its own book of minutes (*libro de actas*), in which a record of communal meetings is kept; at the end of each meeting, all present must sign or fingerprint next to their name—a solemn and time-consuming ritual, in which each

man signs before taking the hand of his wife and pressing it into the inkpad and then onto the book, at the point indicated by the schoolteacher. Each bearer of formal authority, such as the lieutenant governor (*teniente gobernador*), the locally elected representative of the state, is recognized and his authority legitimized through his possession of a document of appointment (*nombramiento*) issued by a local governmental authority.

Although very few Urarina possessed them in 2005, everyone I knew aspired to having their own full set of personal identity documents, comprising the birth certificate (*partida de nacimiento*), military card (*libreta militar*), and most importantly of all the national identity card (*documento nacional de identidad* or *DNI*). The latter has become particularly important in recent years with the introduction of the conditional cash transfer program known as *Juntos* ('together'), which aims to alleviate poverty by distributing small sums of money to the poorest households in Peru, but which requires (women) recipients to possess a national identity card (thus excluding large numbers of Urarina). Identity documents also ensure recognition by the state as a citizen with rights, and hence protection by the law, and this too is valued. For example, my friend Lorenzo (then the *teniente gobernador* of Nueva Unión) once told me a story about a Cocama man he met on the ferry to Iquitos, who immediately recognized him as Urarina by his lack of shoes. The man proceeded to strike up a conversation, greeting Lorenzo in the Urarina language. Lorenzo initially thought he must be a mestizo schoolteacher who had worked somewhere along the Chambira river, because he was wearing a nice watch and leather shoes. The Cocama man invited Lorenzo for a few drinks, and spoke of how the mestizos used to exploit and intimidate both the Cocama and the Urarina people alike, but that this was no longer possible because now he had his identity documents. He was a Peruvian citizen, with rights, and even the owner of the ferry they travelled on could not make him disembark on a whim.

The documents of the kind described above are a source of great pride and confer or confirm a particular identity. A second and somewhat different type of document is that sent to others to safeguard or pursue one's interests or those of the community; these often require the first type to be effective. The most important example is perhaps the 'request', *solicitud*, sent to local governmental authorities soliciting goods or other forms of assistance, such as materials for the school or other civic projects. The following is a typical (and typically idiosyncratic) example of the genre, sent to the local mayor in an effort to secure a range of goods for the community:

YEAR OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND RECOGNITION OF OUR DIVERSITY

Nueva Unión 10–05–2012

REQUEST

SIR: RUNISMA ORINSON BARRERA VELA, Mayor of the District Municipality of Urarinas, Maypuco, Marañon River.

Subject: Requesting your great support

To Whom It May Concern:

I have the pleasure to address you, to greet you cordially on behalf of all the villagers of Nueva Unión, Chambira River, of the district of Urarinas, while asking for your great support in meeting the needs of our children and therefore the needs of our community, which have been forgotten by the other authorities or the mayor of the district, and thus we come to you to ask you for the following:

– 4 dozen notebooks of 100 sheets

– 2 dozen assorted pens

– 2 dozen pencils

– 4 dozen erasers

– ½ dozen correctors

– 4 packs assorted chalks

– 4 drums of gasoline

– 1 litre of oil 40

– 1 dozen sports uniforms

– 1 football

– 60 bottles of cane liquor

Awaiting thus your reply and personal esteem, and signed by the authorities and inhabitants.

Sincerely, …

Surprising as it may seem (not least given the hopeful inclusion of 60 bottles of alcohol, buried at the end of this particular list), requests such as these do sometimes prove effective, particularly around the time of local elections. Lorenzo, who at one time was the lieutenant governor of his community, took great pride in his modest collection of official documents and clearly saw them as enhancing his authority and legitimacy. One of his prized possessions was a thick report published by Defensoría del Pueblo, an organization established to safeguard the legal rights of the native peoples of Peru. It was entitled 'The Right to Identity and the Performance of State Administration: Verified problems in defensorial supervision' (*El derecho a la identidad y la actuación de la administración estatal: Problemas verificados en la supervisión defensorial*). A source of much satisfaction, Lorenzo asked me on several occasions to read it to him. Judging that reading the entire book aloud might take months, I selected a couple of paragraphs more or less at random, and I think I was not alone in marveling at the ostentatious formality and sheer ponderousness of the language used.

Not all documents are of an official nature; notes and letters also circulate among the communities, particularly between schoolteachers, such as those bearing invitations to local celebrations and football tournaments. Written invitations or requests addressed to particular individuals, using that person's full name in Spanish, seemed particularly hard to turn down. Documents are not always viewed as unambiguously positive, and some are considered dangerous. Paper as a material may have something to do with this; like other materials not found in the local environment, paper is the property of the Devil, or rather a Devil-like being known as *Moconajaera*, or 'The Burner', the 'Mother' and personification of fire, who burns the souls of Urarina in his celestial fire in accordance with the quantities of commodities consumed during their lifetime. The Burner is said to keep track of this consumption in his notebook, where he diligently writes down people's existential debts, much as fluvial traders themselves record the debts owed to them by their native clients (see Walker 2012).

Although most documents are not considered overtly dangerous as such, there exists a specialized healing chant, known as the *aansaiuru quiricha baau* (literally, 'book of the wicked people chant'), which may be intoned for the purposes of curing any mystical harm done to infants as a result of exposure to books or newspapers. The chant invokes the ancestors of the now-defunct Jebero people, whose children were said to be able to withstand the dangers of printed newspapers and never fall ill, and it aims to extend this resistive capacity to the Urarina child being treated through a series of metaphoric juxtapositions.

Although some parts of the text remain somewhat obscure due to the arcane language used, repeated use is made of the term *cojounaca*, meaning 'signal', 'shadow', or 'image'. *Cojounaca* is used to refer to photographs, as well as to a person's shadow or silhouette, and is associated with the shadow soul (*corii*). It would therefore appear that the potential danger inherent in documents may be most associated not with paper itself, or even with writing, but with the images or photographs printed on its surface.

If relatively few documents are considered overtly dangerous in themselves, they are almost all nevertheless considered capable of some form of action. The typical document is not viewed primarily as informative, but performative. In short, documents do things: they may be sources of knowledge, but they are first and foremost a particular mode of action. As Hull (2012) has shown, paper documents can have pragmatic effects in various contexts. This ability is in turn closely related to their singularity: hence, 'copies' of documents do not quite carry the same performative effects. Among Urarina, generally speaking, documents extend people's power or influence, representing an attempt to persuade or coerce others to act in a certain way, or they confer or verify an identity—in many cases the identity necessary for one's documents to have the desired persuasive effect. A direct link is made between authority and the exertion of influence through documents. A crucial example would be the preparation of the *denuncia*, or formal complaint, sent to local authorities in cases of dispute or conflict, typically drawing their attention to a perceived misdemeanor by another and requesting that appropriate retributive or restitutive action be taken. Sometimes deployed as an offensive weapon of sorts (see Walker 2015), the ability to prepare a persuasive *denuncia* is as valued as the identity card number that grants the sender officially recognized existence as a citizen. To take another example, Lorenzo spent considerable time and effort trying to persuade the rest of his community to contribute or 'collaborate' towards the costs of a proposed voyage to Iquitos for the purposes of procuring his national identity card (DNI). This was the source of some tension, as not everyone was keen to help. He tried to justify the cost by explaining that with his newfound powers as the holder of an identity card, he would be able to help people more effectively. He needed the card, he said, 'in order to be Peruvian; in order to be a citizen.' But he would also assert confidently: 'I need my identity card in order to make my community grow'. He would, moreover, assist his *comuneros* in his capacity as a citizen, in proportion to the degree of financial assistance they had provided. While in Iquitos, he also expressed a desire to procure a rubber stamp (*sello*) for his younger brother (and close ally) Santos, allowing him to produce documents in his official capacity as

President of the Parent–Teacher Association (*Presidente de APAFA*). It was clear that his interest in the material trappings of official bureaucracy grew out of eminently practical goals.

The Authority of Displaced Voice

It has been claimed that writing is often perceived with awe in early contact situations because of its ability to communicate across spatial and temporal distances—a feat often said to be equated with 'magical powers', analogous to the ability to predict the future or to communicate with spirits (Wogan 1994). The ability to read and write was awe-inspiring to the Native Americans, for example, 'largely because it duplicated a spiritual feat that only the greatest shamans could perform, namely, that of reading the mind of a person at a distance and thereby, in an oral context, foretelling the future' (Axtell 1988: 93, cited in Wogan 1994: 412).[7] However, while the ability of writing to communicate across distance almost certainly accounts for part of its allure and initial mystery, more important is its ability to displace or delegate voice. Most documents produced by Urarina are visually unimpressive, and beyond a preference for using rubber stamps wherever possible and for white bond paper over pages removed from ruled school notebooks, there is little apparent attempt to make them more visually appealing. As already noted, the vast majority of documents are listened to rather than looked at, and read out loud by someone other than their author. Far from being exceptional, such a scenario appears to have long been typical of the use of documents in many parts of the region. In the following extract, Platt describes how the exercise of political power in the Spanish and créole states was achieved through a combination of oral and written procedures:

> The act of *dictation* of an order, decision, etc., by a state authority is followed by the act of *writing* by a scribe, notary or secretary; *copies* are distributed to subsidiary authorities and the persons concerned; these copies are *received* with various gestures of respect and obedience (e.g., kissing them and placing them on the receiver's head); and finally their content is communicated through *reading aloud* to those unable to read. (1992: 139)

Except for the use of copies and gestures of obedience, the Urarina today follow similar procedures.

A cursory examination of the paradigm of powerful, authoritative speech, namely shamanic chanting, reveals one of its most important features to be that the words being spoken do not originate with the enunciator himself. The chant known as *coaairi baauno*, for example, is always enunciated following the consumption of either *ayahuasca* or *brugmansia* and typically lasts for several hours or until the effects wear off. Although the chant is effectively improvised, its contents unpredictable, it tends to comprise fixed, formulaic expressions of one kind or another, the words of which are invariably said to come directly from the spirit mother of the hallucinogenic plant consumed, who speaks 'through' the shaman (Walker 2013: 185). The shaman himself is effectively said to act as a mouthpiece, although he must still 'learn' how to chant through practice and experience. By enunciating the chant, the shaman is thought able to pursue a diverse array of ends, which include knowing the outcome of future events, curing illness, replenishing the supply of game animals in the forest, and temporarily postponing the imminent apocalypse. Although the chant appears to have a kind of performative force of its own, Urarina also say that the shaman uses the chant to solicit the help of the Creator, who is believed to be responsible for bringing about his aims.

Shamans are not alone in manipulating their speech in this way: some birdsong is also believed to have the capacity to foretell the future. Indeed, the model for this kind of shamanic singing seems to be the songbird. Birds advise humans and some non-humans on issues ranging from rising water levels to the imminent arrival of enemies. They are not, however, the ultimate source or origin of the message; rather, they act as envoys and mouthpieces of divinities. Like many other Amazonians, Urarina draw an analogy between shamans and birds, sustained in part by their presumed ability to fly, the former's extensive use of feathers as decoration, their proximity to the sky, and their intermediary position between earth and the sky. Above all, songbirds are noted for the fact that they are almost 'pure voice'—the source of disembodied voices in the forest. People say that the songs of various birds have a prophetic quality, and an ability to foretell future events. They also say that birds are not the ultimate sources of these messages; they act as mouthpieces for divinities who wish to communicate with humans and others.

It is perhaps this fascination with displaced voice that partly explains why people were often eager to listen to recordings of myths and chants, and relatively disinterested in hearing

live versions. They were particularly keen to hear versions of myths and chants that came from other parts of Urarina territory. This would seem to be another reason why displaced voice is powerful: it conveys connotations of having come from far away, and the locus of power is far removed from the self, in the hands of real or imagined others. This is important in explaining the power of birdsong, the source of which is even further from earthly human existence than the birds themselves. Documents, too, carry or convey a certain 'otherness', with these connotations of a provenance far removed, at the hands of more powerful others. This phenomenon is perhaps similar to what Bourdieu (1991) has termed the 'oracle effect', whereby someone speaks in the name of something that he brings into existence by his very discourse: 'A whole series of symbolic effects that are exercised every day in politics rest on this sort of ursurpatory ventriloquism, which consists in giving voice to those in whose name one is authorized to speak' (1991:211–12). It is this 'speaking in the name of' that authorizes a move from the indicative to the imperative: the oracle effect is a particular kind of performativity: it 'enables the authorized spokesperson to take his authority from the group which authorizes him in order to exercise recognized constraint, symbolic violence, on each of the isolated members of the group' (1991: 212).

The Work of Transduction

That the displacement of voice characteristic of documents takes place through a conversion from speaking to writing and back again, as documents are first dictated and later orated, leads us to a second feature of documents that warrants special consideration. Keane (2013) has termed "semiotic transduction" those practices that aim to tap into the power thought to be generated by the very act of transforming something from one semiotic modality to another (using the analogy of, say, a turbine that uses the movement of water to convert kinetic to electrical energy). A wide range of examples are given, all involving manipulations of material or written signs of one kind or another: from Tibetan prayer wheels, to Indonesian haruspicy or entrails divination, to a recent public event in New York's Times Square, in which bundles of documents representing people's negative (but otherwise immaterial) memories (failed exam scores, mortgages, and the like) were ceremonially 'shredded' to bring about a positive transformation of thought and feeling. According to Keane, such practices of apparent materialization and dematerialization are often seen as a means of

drawing power from a higher source because of the ways in which they make manifest to people the relationship between phenomenal and non-phenomenal worlds (Keane 2013:10).

Similar kinds of controlled transformation or 'transduction' across semiotic modalities feature in a range of important Urarina cultural practices. They are central to the genre of ritual discourse known as *baau*, which is used primarily to heal illness and various forms of affliction in infants and small children. To perform the *baau* correctly, the words are chanted or sung *sotto voce* into a physical object, usually a small bowl of mother's milk, or banana drink in the case of older children. A hand is often held over the top of the bowl, as though to emphasize the materiality of the words by ostensibly impeding them from escaping. The liquid is then offered to the patient to drink, at which time the words are said to enter into the bloodstream, whence they dissolve 'like sugar into coffee' and take effect.

Another example would be the baby hammock, which transforms properties associated with material objects into sound via the rattle, whence they enter into an infant's body as he or she sleeps. Such properties may be relatively concrete, such as the whiteness or hardness of bone, or more abstract, such as the honey-finding abilities of the coati (a long-snouted member of the raccoon family), thought to be imbued in one of its teeth. By stringing together a series of small objects in this way, a 'message' of sorts is effectively written or composed by the baby's mother using the indexical and iconic properties of objects; this is then transformed into sound and eventually reconstituted in a new physical form as the desired qualities are incorporated in the infant's growing body. In both the above examples, the 'magic' in question (for want of a better word) is closely associated with the work of semiotic transduction. Documents similarly draw attention to possible connections between phenomenal and non-phenomenal worlds, as they encode voice into new material forms and subsequently allow for its reproduction in sound. The document itself represents but a single moment in an ongoing, dynamic process of text-making and remaking, or acts of 'entextualization' and 'recontextualization' (Silverstein and Urban 1996), in which texts are transposed and transduced across multiple boundaries and contexts, giving rise to new possibilities for reiteration or reanimation in text-related performances. Insofar as speaking and writing may both be considered as material, we find that texts accrue histories across various media and forms of materiality, where each act of recontextualization may at the same time be a kind of rematerialization with potential performative force (Nakassis 2013).

The Allure of Permanence

A third important quality of documents is their fixity or stability. This is closely related to a particular property of writing that has long received attention from scholars, namely, its apparent partial autonomy, or detachment from people. Goody and Watt (1963) argued that by creating a text 'out there', detached from its creators, the written word can become the subject of a new kind of critical attention. Unlike human beings to whom one can talk, texts require interpretation, explanation, and even translation (see Goody 1986: 129). Keane (2013:12) also observes that the authority of a scripture may derive precisely from its apparent permanence, and its ability to speak to hypothetical future audiences, to the point that a text 'may be iconic of power over time itself, by virtue of its apparent ability to enter into communication with eternity.'

The capacity of documents to fix or pin language is exemplified by the recent uptake of identity documents and the consequences for naming practices. Although many Urarina have long had Spanish names in addition to their Urarina names, which they use in all interactions with outsiders when speaking in Spanish, these tended until recently to change at the whim of either the individuals themselves or, in the case of children, at the whim of their parents. Many women in particular did not know their name in Spanish, when asked, and would often turn to their husbands for advice. The Spanish system of paternal and maternal surnames was often deployed in a particularly unpredictable or idiosyncratic manner; for example, full siblings, with the same social and biological parents, might sometimes share only one or neither of their two surnames; the other surnames might be taken not from the parents but rather from a grandparent or some other relative. This caused considerable frustration among the German and Dutch medical doctors operating in the area, whose efforts to keep accurate immunization records and the like were undermined by what they saw as instability and either ignorance of, or indifference to, 'proper' naming conventions. This has all begun to change, however, with the introduction of identity documents in the past couple of years, thanks to mobile registration campaigns by the regional office of RENIEC (*Registro Nacional de Identificación y Estado Civil*), whose functionaries on a number of occasions have travelled by boat from Iquitos to some of the Urarina communities. People recognize that it is impossible to change one's name once in possession of an identity card, and explicitly told me so. Such identity documents are, of course, a central feature of the forms of governance adopted by many colonial and post-colonial states, and their proliferation should

be seen in the context of attempts by state-building projects to make persons more 'legible' (e.g. Kelly 2006; Scott 1998). They are also integral to the process by which state power becomes embodied and acquires experiential content (Lund 2001).[8] Yet they also exemplify the tendency towards a certain fixity and stability that is exemplary of much writing in general. In the context of a highly fluid and unstable sociality in which little endures over time, from kinship groups to material artifacts, this seems to be a characteristic that is particularly appreciated.

A key document central to local bureaucratic practices is the *libro de actas*, or book of minutes, in which the resolutions made in the communal meetings (*asambleas comunales*)—held periodically by law in each Native Community—are recorded. Although such meetings are ostensibly held in order to reach a collective agreement on some pressing issue or proposal, they are far from being a forum for open discussion or debate; because of the desire to avoid overt conflict and the premium placed on harmonious sociality, public disagreement is rare. As such, the relevant discussions are held discreetly over the preceding days leading up to the meeting, face-to-face, and in very small groups. In this manner, gradually, consensus is reached. The true function of the meeting, then, is to make this consensus public, to fix it in place, as it were, and thereby to give it some kind of binding power. This does not always happen, as Gasché Suess and Vela Mendoza (2011: 80) have emphasized, for such decisions are not always universally respected. Nevertheless, the recording in the book of minutes of a collective agreement undoubtedly gives it a kind of gravitas while offering a reliable source of evidence for anyone wishing to enforce the decision at a future date. At an ideological level the book of minutes is precisely the displaced voice of the collective, suitably materialized in paper form.

To return to my own letter of introduction and its gratifying utility, it is surely noteworthy that people insisted that it be read aloud a number of times, as though to put its purported permanence to the test. The document's resolute imperviousness to any deviation across repeated readings or performances, in other words, seemed closely connected to its legitimacy and persuasiveness. This fixity is further reinforced by the formality of most documents—a closely related, and esteemed, quality to which the Urarina aspire. Formal language is a way of increasing the level of structuring and predictability of discourse (Bloch 1975), and all written forms of communication aspire to be as formal as possible within the capacities of their scribe, often deploying stock phrases gleaned from official communications sent by representatives of the Peruvian state. Formal language also

duplicates or reinforces the separation of voice and agency that is characteristic of displaced or delegated speech, of the kind often associated with documents in general: one of its key features is the shift of emphasis from the personal identity of the speaker to his or her role, thereby invoking positional and public as opposed to personal identities, along with a sense of social distance (e.g. Irvine 1979). The point of sending a document with a stamp or seal is similarly to emphasize that the author is writing not in his capacity as an individual, but rather as the bearer of an official role, invested with special authority. The author, in other words, purports to speak neither in terms of personal interest nor in a voice located in the moment of speaking. In many contexts today, especially those pertaining to the ideology of the Native Community, a person cannot act with authority in the name of individual interests if he is to be recognized by his counterparts as a legitimate social agent. All these features contribute to documents' efficacy and aura of permanence.

Conclusion

Documents circulate widely among Peruvian Urarina, and in the process they create or sustain various kinds of relatedness, over ever-larger distances. Yet they do not simply disseminate rationality and efficiency as part of a bureaucratic 'objectivity machine' (Hoag 2011) or engine for a 'rule by Nobody' (Arendt 1970) in which people are deprived of their political freedom or the power to act. As Neumann (2012) shows in his analysis of the Guaraní "conquest of writing" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Paraguay, communicating in the same registers used by colonizers can enhance political agency. Documents are personalized as they are drawn into everyday life in various ways, and yet in contrast to the Nukulaelae case discussed by Besnier (1995), Urarina letters display only a bare minimum of affect and are in no way 'conversational'. Given the wide array of contemporary literacy practices found throughout the region, pointing to the manifold ways in which literacy users 'reinterpret the dominant literacy, modify its meaning, and employ it for their own proposes, in accordance with local ideas and practices' (de la Piedra 2009: 113; see also Zavala et al. 2004), it is clear that literacy must be approached ethnographically with reference to lived experiences of writing and its relation to social power, as well as to other forms of communication, for literacy and orality are frequently intertwined in social life. This may mean contextualizing engagements with writing in relation to a wide range of semiotic

modalities and sensory experiences, including forms of reported speech (which, as Voloshinov 1973 has shown, may offer revealing information about social and historical tendencies). Crucially, writing cannot be understood independently of the situated practice of reading. Indeed, in Europe throughout antiquity and until the Renaissance, most ordinary social reading was not a private or silent act, but was done aloud by someone to a group of listeners (Carruthers 1990: 17–18).

While resisting overly simplistic characterizations of Urarina as 'non-literate' or 'pre-literate', and recognizing that Urarina concepts of textuality and literacy are undergoing continual transformation, this article points to the importance, in the first instance, of concepts of the authoritative voice, as exemplified by birds and ritual specialists. This voice is almost always displaced or delegated, leading to a separation of utterance and agency, which has two important effects. One is face saving: it helps shield participants from the consequences of failure. To take the example of Bolon's letter to his son, with which this article began: were the request made in person, a direct refusal by the son might have resulted in a greater degree of embarrassment for all parties.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, delegated voice permits the principal actors to remain offstage but implicitly and authoritatively present (Keane 1991). It implicates participants in a scale of action beyond that of daily interactions, and is therefore crucial to how local action comes to be identified with larger structures and orders, ratifying the social and value-laden character of the agency in question. Delegated voice implicitly depicts the agent as that which lies behind or beyond, indexing the presence of a canonical authority, manifest only through subordinate actors. The sender of a document is thus in some ways assimilated to the position of a divinity, such as the mother of psychotropics, whose powerful words are given vocal presence by shamans and birds. Thus, both the shaman and the author of documents construct, through their respective technologies, an image of a transcendental authority, ratified by a wider social and political order, whose agency transcends that of a lone individual. In some cases, this may be an image of the community as a whole, or of the Peruvian state. Either way, the document does not possess agency by virtue of being an extension of its sender, as part of his distributed person, or as what Gell (1998) terms a 'secondary agent'; if anything, it is the opposite: a document's words acquire power through their partial *detachment* from the issuer. They amplify the sender's agency, by displacing it from the context of utterance and thereby conjuring, through a kind of back-projection, a higher source of authority that transcends the individual. Documents are thus an especially

potent kind of materialized speech act, which is why Bolon thought a written document to his son would be more persuasive than his own spoken words.

The attribution of special power to writing has long been held to be common in situations of 'restricted literacy' where its use is controlled by a small minority of specialists. The inaccessibility of writing—its perceived difficulty—no doubt accounts for much of its appeal; that said, however, individual skills may be less important than demonstrated ability to handle writing in the public sphere (see also Rockwell 2010). Writing and shamanism are often seen as intimately connected with the well being of the community and as technologies of persuasion—ritualized forms of intervention that sometimes seek to act directly on the world but often involve soliciting assistance from others in order to achieve set goals. This can involve an insistence on formality and repetition, as well as forms of semiotic transduction, through processes of materialization and dematerialization that are central to shamanic practice (e.g. Hill 2009). The relative permanence of writing in relation to speech hints at the possibility of stability in a world characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, and impermanence; hence the connection to meetings, which strive for objectivity through their display of a public consensus, detaching words and opinions from individual authors and tying them to the group as a whole. In the final analysis, it is nevertheless tempting to invert the assumption that ostensibly 'modern' documents are interpreted with reference to the pre-existing framework of 'traditional' shamanism. Given half a millennium of colonial history in which a combination of oral and written procedures, often centering on techniques of control by means of paper, have played a central role in the consolidation of power, shamanism in the South American lowlands may have evolved in ways that reflect this, eventually being shaped by the bureaucratic and legal apparatus of colonial and republican states and the paper trails that run through them.

References Cited

Albert, Bruce. 1993. L'or Cannibale et La Chute Du Ciel: Une Critique Chamanique de L'economie Politique de La Nature (Yanomami, Bresil). L'Homme 33 (126/128): 349–378.

Arendt, Hannah. 1970. On Violence. London: Allen Lane.

Besnier, Niko. 1995. Literacy, Emotion and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bloch, Maurice. 1975. Introduction. In M. Bloch (ed.) Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society, pp. 1–28. New York: Academic Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. Language and Symbolic Power: The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges. Cambridge: Polity.

Carruthers, Mary. 1990. The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Cesarino, Pedro de Niemeyer. 2012. A escrita e os corpos desenhados: Transformações do conhecimento xamanístico entre os Marubo. Revista de Antropologia 55(1): 75–137.

Clastres, Pierre. 1987. Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology. New York: Zone Books.

De la Piedra, María Teresa. 2009. Hybrid Literacies: The Case of a Quechua Community in the Andes. Anthropology and Education Quarterly 40(2): 110–128.

Déléage, Pierre. 2010. Rituels du Livre en Amazonie. Cahiers des Amériques Latines 63/64: 229–250.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. Of Grammatology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Erikson, Philippe. 2004. Chamanisme, Écriture et Ethnopolitique. L'Homme 3: 525–528.

Gasché Suess, Jorge and Vela Mendoza, Napoleón. 2011. Sociedad Bosquesina. Tomo I: Ensayo de antropología rural amazonica, acompañado de una crítica y propuesta alternativa de proyectos de desarrollo. Iquitos: Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonía Peruana.

Gell, Alfred. 1998. Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

González Echevarría, Roberto. 1990. Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goody, Jack. 1968. Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana: Literacy in Traditional Societies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——— 1986. The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gordillo, Gastón.2006. The Crucible of Citizenship: ID-Paper Fetishism in the Argentinean Chaco. American Ethnologist 33(2): 162–176.

Gow, Peter. 1990. Could Sangama Read? The Origin of Writing among the Piro of Eastern Peru. History and Anthropology 5 (1): 87–103.

Guzman-Gallegos, María. 2009. Identity cards, abducted footprints, and the book of San Gonzalo: The power of textual objects in Runa worldview. In Fernando Santos-Granero (ed). The Occult Life of Things: Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood, pp. 214–34. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Hoag, Colin. 2011. Assembling Partial Perspectives: Thoughts on the Anthropology of Bureaucracy. PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review 34 (1): 81–94.

Hill, Jonathan D. 2009. Materializing the Occult: An Approach to Understanding the Nature of Materiality in Wakuénai Ontology. Fernando Santos Granero, ed. The Occult Life of Things: Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood, pp. 235–261. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Hull, Matthew. 2012. Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Irvine, Judith T. 1979. Formality and Informality in Communicative Events. American Anthropologist 81 (4): 773–790.

Johnson, Christopher. 1997. Lévi-Strauss: The Writing Lesson Revisited. Modern Language Review 92 (3): 599–612.

Keane, Webb. 1991. Delegated Voice: Ritual Speech, Risk, and the Making of Marriage Alliances in Anakalang. American Ethnologist 18 (2): 311–330.

——— 2013. On Spirit Writing: Materialities of Language and the Religious Work of Transduction. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 19(1): 1–17.

Kelly, Tobias. 2006. Documented Lives: Fear and the Uncertainties of Law during the Second Palestinian Intifada. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 12 (1): 89–107.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1961. Tristes Tropiques. New York: Criterion Books.

Lund, Sarah. 2001. Bequeathing and Quest: Processing Personal Identification Papers in Bureaucratic Spaces (Cuzco, Peru). Social Anthropology 9 (1): 3–24.

Macedo, Silvia Lopes da Silva. 2009. Xamanizando a Escrita: Aspectos Comunicativos da Escrita Ameríndia. Mana 15(2): 509–528.

Nakassis, Constantine. 2013. Materiality, Materialization. HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 3(3):399–406.

Neumann, Eduardo S. 2012. De la Conquista Espiritual a la Conquista del Alfabeto: La Escritura Indigena en las Reducciones del Paraguay (siglos XVII–XVIII). In Bilhaut, Anne-Gaël and Macedo, Silvia (eds). Tradición, Escritura y Patrimonialización, pp. 43–76. Quito: Abya-Yala.

Platt, Tristan. 1992. Writing, shamanism and identity, or voices from Abya-Yala. History Workshop Journal 34: 132–147.

Rappaport, Joanne and Cummins, Tom. 2012. Beyond the Lettered City: Indigenous Literacies in the Andes. Durham: Duke University Press.

Riles, Annelise. 1999. Models and Documents: Artefacts of International Legal Knowledge. International and Comparative Law Quarterly 48 (4): 805–825.

Rockwell, Elsie. 2010. L'appropriation de l'écriture dans deux villages nahua du centre du Mexique. *Langage et société* 133(3): 83-99.

Salomon, Frank and Nino-Murcía, Mercedes. 2011. The Lettered Mountain: A Peruvian Village's Way with Writing. Durham: Duke University Press.

Santos-Granero, Fernando. 1998. Writing History into the Landscape: Space, Myth, and Ritual in Contemporary Amazonia. American Ethnologist 25 (2): 128–148.

Scott, James C. 1998. Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Silverstein, Michael and Urban, Greg. 1996. Natural Histories of Discourse. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Uzendoski, Michael. 2012. Beyond Orality: Textuality, Territoriality, and Ontology among Amazonian Peoples. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(1): 55-80.

Voloshinov, V. N. 1973. Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. New York: Seminar Press.

Walker, Harry. 2012. Demonic Trade: Debt, Materiality and Agency in Amazonia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(1): 140-159.

——— 2013. *Under a Watchful Eye: Self, Power, and Intimacy in Amazonia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——— 2015. Justice and the Dark Arts: Law and Shamanism in Amazonia. *American Anthropologist* 117(1): 47-58.

Wogan, Peter. 1994. Perceptions of European Literacy in Early Contact Situations. Ethnohistory 41 (3): 407–429.

Zavala, Virgina. 2002. Desencuentros con la Escritura: Escuela y Comunidad en los Andes Peruanos. Lima: Red para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Sociales en el Perú.

Zavala, Virginia, Mercedes Niño-Murcia, and Patricia Ames, eds. 2004. Escritura y Sociedad: Nuevas Perspectivas Teóricas y Etnográficas. Lima: Red para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Sociales en el Perú.

Notes

[1] Platt (1992: 137) elaborates: 'The documentary invention of America was achieved through the incessant production of many different written genres: *requerimientos, visitas, relaciones, encomiendas, repartimientos, tasaciones, probanzas, composiciones, mercedes, situaciones,* etc.'

[2] See also Macedo 2009; Déléage 2010; Cesarino 2012.

[3] As Street (1993: 25) argues, an ethnographic perspective allows us to see how literacy is assimilated to existing conventions and concepts regarding communication, as people actively and creatively apply literate skills to suit their own purposes and needs.

[4] Despite the missionary presence, few of the Urarina I met could be considered Christians. I observed no functioning churches and little interest in reading the Bible, despite the recent

publication of the Urarina New Testament; the few copies I came across were kept in the houses of schoolteachers, unread.

[5] Around 20 months of fieldwork were conducted in two Urarina communities, mostly between 2005 and 2007, with follow-up visits in 2012 and 2013.

[6] In his analysis of "ID-paper fetishism" among the Argentinian Toba and Wichí, Gordillo (2006: 163) suggests that alienation or estrangement (in this case from citizenship rights) has led people to construe the value and potency of documents as emanating directly from their materiality, rather than from social relations and conventions. Such processes may also be at work among Urarina, with the caveat that the connotations of mystification or irrationality that tend to surround the concept of fetishism should not overshadow the practical utility of many official documents, or the ways in which their value is enhanced by the difficulty of obtaining them.

[7] Besnier (1995: 63) adds, 'early reports from many parts of the Pacific similarly emphasize "the sheer magic of the written word in primitive eyes" (Parsonon 1967: 44).

[8] See also Gordillo 2009 and Guzman-Gallegos 2009.