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WARP/WEFT/WORD: INSCRIPTIVE MATERIALITY, EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE, AND THE INKA KHIPU

Travis Sharp

Around the time when Robert Smithson erected earthworks such as the *Spiral Jetty*, Cecilia Vicuña was working with the environment in her *precarios* (precarious or prayer) or *basuritas* (little garbages), small installations composed using materials found in a given location. These installations began in 1966 at a beach in Con-cón¹ in central Chile. Vicuña describes her first *precario* as an encounter with the environment: “I felt the wind and the sea feeling me. I knew I had to respond to the Earth in a language that the tide would erase. I arranged the litter I saw strewn about. I called it *arte precario* knowing that art had begun in me.”² Contra to Smithson’s insistently monumental works intended to leave a permanent mark, Vicuña’s are rooted in an insistence on human artifice as temporary and imbricated with the natural. The name of these works suggests not only their precarious forms, which Vicuña leaves in the same space where she finds the construction materials, but also of the precarious state of the environment that the materials’ very presence indicates (as the *precarios* are typically constructed using litter and debris). Vicuña’s aesthetics is one of connection and hyperawareness of the impacts of human presence and action, whether that be the accumulation of garbage on the beach in Con-cón or the impact of an audience or a setting on a performance.

This aesthetics of connection is legible within Vicuña’s expansive work with thread. In many of her poetry performances, she threads the audience together with a long string of wool. In place of a reading designed to contextualize, historicize, and present poetry for the purpose of (albeit meager) book purchases, in which the ethos of the event is one of placing the audience into the (abstracted, disembodied) text, Vicuña’s performances interweave the text with the audience, the setting, and the poet. The simultaneity of improvisation and threading the audience reveals its significance here, as Vicuña’s reading is less about the transference of predetermined language from poet to reader and more about

the interconnectedness of people and place that language performs. In this article, I argue that another of Vicuña's thread-based artistic practices—her work with the Indigenous inscription practice known as the *kipu*³—operates according to an analogous logic, in which thread and language are deployed in service of an aesthetic project of connection, listening, and response over and against an aesthetics of clear transmission. In other words, Vicuña's artworks do not necessarily say a thing, but they signify a way of saying. I am interested in how this aesthetics operates within historical contexts, thinking through how Vicuña's *kipu*-based practices are responsive to colonialism, genocide, and the epistemological violence against Indigenous language and knowledge practices. In this article, I study Vicuña's *kipu*-based practices vis-à-vis epistemological violence. I focus on how the epistemological violence of the Spanish conquest of the Inka⁴ unfolded in part along the contours of divergent semiotics, as the epistemological domination of alphabetic text over thread-based inscription practices and semasiography. Through studies of Vicuña's *kipu*-based works, including *Quipu That Remembers Nothing* (1966),⁵ *Quipu in the Gutter* (1989),⁶ and *Skyscraper Quipu* (2006),⁷ as well as her *kipu*-influenced textual works from *QUIPOem*, I show how Vicuña's poetics relies on a colonial history of erasure and intersemiotic assimilation while critiquing it, offering a model of bibliographic and epistemological engagement that works to intersect divergent semiotics without subsuming them.

The Inscriptive Materiality of Inka Khipu

Khipus are assemblages of knotted cords and twined threads structured by a primary, or "title," cord to which are attached secondary or pendant cords bearing knots. In his 1923 book, *The Ancient Quipu or Peruvian Knot Record*, L. Leland Locke postulated that the *kipu* was an Inkan accounting apparatus recording numerical data, such as a census or tax record.⁸ Locke's work was inspired by Max Uhle's 1897 call for a comparative methodology in which a scholar reviews a large quantity of *kipus* in juxtaposition to attempt a decipherment. The Inka used base 10 mathematics, and Locke argued the placement of knots on secondary cords correlated with base 10 exponents, "with the highest number being closest to the loop or closed end of the cord that is fastened to the primary cord."⁹ The number of knots corresponds to the size of the number recorded. In this system, additional knots indicate additional base 10 exponents. Locke postulated that certain knots operated as signifiers—for example, a specific

knot indicates the number three present in the 1,000-exponent position, signifying 3,000—while loop number materializes this signifier (e.g., three was represented with a knot of three loops). In this way, *kipus* would be able to record specific numbers, akin to early numerical inscriptions based on one-to-one equivalence such as counting numbers using pebbles or the inscription of etched marks. A corollary to this theory is the view that *kipus* are individualized rather than shared, memory aid devices akin to a Catholic rosary. (The analogy of the *kipu* to the rosary is notable, as the rosary itself is descended from a knotted thread system of personal accounting, the prayer ropes used in Eastern Orthodox churches and invented by the Egyptian Christian Desert Fathers to keep track of prayers.) For Locke, *kipus* contain only numerical data, not any information that might classify or contextualize these data, which exists wholly within human memory.

Walter Ong similarly refers to *kipus* as *aide-mémoire*, describing them as “a stick with suspended cords onto which other cords were tied” and comparing the *kipu* with other memory aids and “recording devices,” such as “a notched stick, rows of pebbles” and “the ‘winter count’ calendars of the Native American Plains Indians.”¹⁰ (Ong’s description of *kipus* as cords hanging from sticks is true of ancient *kipu* precursors but not of Inka *kipus*.) Ong sees such “recording devices” that are limited to a single reading subject as separate from writing, closer instead to “purely biological behavior”:

Using the term “writing” in this extended sense to include any semiotic marking trivializes its meaning. The critical and unique breakthrough into new worlds of knowledge was achieved within human consciousness not when simple semiotic marking was devised but when a coded system of visible marks was invented whereby a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text. This is what we usually mean today by writing in its sharply focused sense.¹¹

For Ong, what distinguishes writing from marking is encoded adequation between signified and signifier, which is in turn predicated on a distinction between object-signification and utterance-signification. Ong enshrines a division between writing and marking in that the former signifies sounds that in turn signify objects, whereas the latter simply signifies an object directly.¹² This direct signification is, for Ong, essentially pictographic. A *kipu*, understood to be an *aide-mémoire*,

visually represents a specific object or set of objects in the world, akin to how notches in a stick might visually represent the number of sheep in a shepherd's care. Such direct representation arises from context-bereft meaning-making. A reader encountering such a text would not know what specifically is being accounted for, in which time, at which place, for which purpose, and so on. The detour through sound that writing takes introduces a level of complexity that allows for more abstract signification. Unlike a direct visual representation, acoustic form allows for more complex and context-laden articulations. One can imagine these communication apparatuses—direct visual representation and complex acoustic articulation—as synchronic, with the etcher referring to the etched marks while speaking to a buyer about the number of sheep available for sale. In such an instance, the pictographic text is supplemented with sound-based communication in order to achieve contextual clarity. For Ong, writing blends these through the rearticulation of sound into a visual form: “[T]he exquisitely intricate structures and references evolved in sound can be visibly recorded exactly in their specific complexity and, because visibly recorded, can implement production of still more exquisite structures and references, far surpassing the potentials of oral utterance”¹³ as well as the potentials of direct, pictographic representation.

The complexity within writing, in which direct representation abstracts into indirect representation and generative linguistic structures that can produce representations not rooted in the material world, translates, for Ong, into a judgment on the development of the writers themselves. Ong argues that “notches on sticks and other *aides-mémoire* [such as the *kipu*] lead up to writing, but they do not restructure the human lifeworld as true writing does.”¹⁴ Ong’s argument about writing is correlated with an argument about human development. Writing “restructures the human lifeworld”¹⁵ through its potential for abstraction and the subsequent intellectual, social, linguistic, and other consequences of such potential, and this restructuring occurs, according to Ong, as a developmental leap or shift from concrete to abstract. It represents both an evolutionary leap and signifies the developmental superiority of those who write over those who do not. In a historical dialectic, earlier inscription practices (marks) are both contained in and superseded by later practices (writing). An argument that *kipus* are memory aid devices is thus for Ong also an argument that the Inka had not yet “achieved” a level of “human consciousness” akin to European colonizers.

Arguments about writing’s constitution and hierarchical position within communication practices are not original with Ong, and historically have prioritized speech over writing. Writing is typically seen as synonymous with “systems of signs which represent speech sounds, that

is, systems which employ ‘glottography’ and ‘phonography.’ This position centers upon . . . the notion of writing as a secondary code that reencodes the primary code through which people refer to ‘things,’ speech.”¹⁶ While Jacques Derrida would come to argue that writing is not secondary to speech but significantly divergent from it, it remains the case that writing is typically understood as necessarily in relation to a spoken language, whether is it secondary to it or not.¹⁷ This dialectical relation among marking, speech, and writing is often taken (by Derrida, Ong, and others) to be the history of communicative development, as human societies progress from synchronic visual and oral communication systems to a synthesized and abstracted system of writing that contains both and transforms them. It is also a history of material substrate, from basic material used for etching to the complex possibilities offered by the codex and the hypertext. These histories are further mapped onto each other, as Amaranth Borsuk shows us through her literature reviews in *The Book*, as the technologies of material substrates evolve according to the developmental potentials of marking and, later, writing.¹⁸ Within such overlapping histories, the khipu necessarily becomes relegated to a point in the past both materially and conceptually, as an outmoded and insufficient inscriptive apparatus.

But we might instead encounter the khipu on alternative terms, perhaps partaking in or representing a different history. Some, such as Catherine Julien, have argued for a more expansive understanding of writing, noting that “a system of symbols does not have to replicate speech to communicate narrative.”¹⁹ Julien suggests that there is a potential for semiosis that is not wholly circumscribed by the specifics of how human semiotics has unfolded, which is, further, not the *only* human semiosis possible, as alphabetic script is a rather late invention in the history of human communication, and was not inevitable. Khipus represent a potential example of semasiography, a term defined by Ignace Gelb as writing in which signs “stand not for the sounds of the name of a referent but rather for the referent itself”; as such, “they are therefore said not to be ‘in’ any particular language”²⁰ but instead constitute *a language in themselves, parallel to but not subsumed by a spoken language*. The most common semasiographic system is mathematics, in which signs refer to referents without themselves necessarily being spoken. While they *can* be spoken, they are not coterminous with a holistic speech system in themselves but instead participate in a broader and separate one. The commonly understood progress of writing moves from the semasiography of mathematics into a fuller speech-writing system, in which the administrative state’s use of writing for the recording of data—semasiographic mathematics—advances into a more commonplace system that becomes

parallel with speech. This is the turn that Ong describes above, in which the “critical and unique breakthrough into new worlds of knowledge was achieved within human consciousness not when simple semiotic marking was devised but when a coded system of visible marks was invented whereby a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text.”²¹

Recent khipu scholarship indicates that they are more semantically rich than a context-bereft aide-mémoire or proto-writing understanding of the khipu would suggest. Locke emphasized knot placement and shape in recording numbers; he ignored the possibility that the structure in place for recording numbers might also be applicable to a system of nonnumerical language. Sabine Hyland, Gene Ware, and Madison Clark argue that knot direction can be indicative of social categorization. They recovered evidence that an S-knot (a knot tied so that the line of the thread within the knot follows the shape of an S, moving from left to right from top to bottom) indicates a higher social ranking, and the Z-knot (tied in an opposing shape) indicates a lower social ranking.²² Similarly, Hyland encountered S-knots that indicated animal sex: an S-knot for female cows and a Z-knot for male cows.²³ Hyland further notes a khipu in which cord arrangement is used to indicate sex difference, with a specific order of pendant cords across the title cord.²⁴ Khipus are constructed using distinctive ply colorations, an effect created either using dyed cotton—the most common form of extant khipus—or wool, or by using different animal furs. In theory, ply orientation and construction, including different animal threads and colored cotton, might also carry meaning. Spanish conquistadors were aware of khipus as carriers of more complex meaning. For example, khipus have been recorded being used as letters carried by a messenger; and they were used extensively in Spanish colonial courts and as carriers of confessions given by Indigenous people forcibly converted to Catholicism.²⁵ It remains the case, however, that khipus are poorly understood. The accounts above regarding khipu inscription potential are drawn primarily from close analysis of khipu descendants, such as contemporary herders’ khipus and colonial authorities’ khipu-based objects.

This lack of understanding descends directly from colonial epistemological violence. Historical records indicate numerous ways in which khipus were utilized in manners more complex than Locke or Ong indicate. The khipu—and the khipukamayuq (or quipucamayoc), the khipu keepers—were kept in place by Spanish colonizers as a means of shoring up their authority. Over time, however, khipus were prohibited. Gary Urton notes that “the Spaniards’ inability to read and therefore to verify

the renderings of khipus produced by native accountants, rendered them dependent on native readings of these records,”²⁶ an inevitably unsustainable situation in a colonial context.²⁷ Similarly, while the khipus were at first seen to be useful figures in the Spanish colonial court system, they become a venue for Indigenous people to voice their claims in the Spanish courts. It became a question of “who keeps the records and therefore controls information in a colonial setting,”²⁸ with the outcome being the banning and burning of the khipu.²⁹ According to Urton, “[T]he replacement of khipus by documents written in Spanish as the official means of record keeping was virtually complete by the 1590s,” resulting in a “radical transformation” of the khipus and their representational capacity. The subsequent “loss of the technical skills and interpretive traditions required to record and retrieve complex narratives from these devices”³⁰ left us with a primarily aide-mémoire collection of artifacts in imperialism’s wake.

Reading Cecilia Vicuña’s Khipu-Based Artworks

Some critics such as Denise Newman assume that Vicuña works within a straightforwardly aide-mémoire understanding of the khipu, arguing that “[Vicuña] has adapted the ancient Incan form of communication called *quipu* that uses knots in wool strings as an aid to memory.”³¹ As Julia Bryan-Wilson points out, Vicuña’s interest in khipus began when she was a teenager, during which time khipus were not well represented in Chilean education³² and Locke’s theories prevailed in academic discourse. Many of Vicuña’s khipu-based works, however, instead of aligning with Locke’s thesis that khipus were aide-mémoire assisting bureaucrats keeping track of the presence of people and things, intermediates the original khipu form with other means of constructing meaning. Vicuña does not so much re-create the original khipu in her artworks as much as she works with some of the formalist elements of the khipu alongside other modes of representation, using the khipu form to represent or visualize an aesthetic experience in a way that the original khipu could not. In doing so, Vicuña does not pick a side in the khipu debate—whether it is marking or writing, whether it is bereft of context or contextualizes differently. Vicuña’s khipu-based works instead intermediate the material and inscriptive possibilities of the khipu form, knots in thread, with modes of representation found in conceptual, performance, and visual art. In *Quipu That Remembers Nothing*, a conceptual art project, Vicuña thought about a khipu, physically creating nothing yet conceptualizing

for herself what a khipu might be. Whereas a traditional khipu must be physically tangible—knotted cords along pendant cords attached to a title cord—Vicuña suggests in the nontangible composition of this khipu that a khipu is more a form or an idea than a thing, like the difference between *writing* and *a written thing*. The very existence of a noncorporeal, purely conceptual khipu is an anticolonial gesture, a rejection of the khipu's destruction by the Spanish, as the Spanish could only destroy the physical artifacts, but never the form or the idea of the khipu. Bryan-Wilson writes that this “title suggests that [I]ndigenous knowledge systems might be fragile threads that have been severed by colonial regimes and cannot easily remember their own histories.”³³ However, this noncorporeal, formless but formalist khipu indicates instead the survivability of Indigenous practices despite colonial attempts at erasure.

In a 1989 project, *Quipu in the Gutter*, Vicuña creates a khipu-based object and leaves it in a gutter on Beach Street in New York (fig. 1). This object retains many of the qualities of a traditional khipu. There is a title cord at the top, to which are attached multiple pendant cords. These are color-coded, with the gold cord as the title cord, and pink and red pendant cords. The only knots visible are those associated with the title cord, and it is difficult to decipher the distinction between *knot* and *bundle* here. Is there a knot on the far left of the title cord, or has the cord simply become bunched up? Are the pendant cords securely fastened to the primary cord, or are they associated loosely? What is noticeable, however, is the lack of knots on the pendant cords themselves, which is largely where khipus hold their meaning. Like the *Quipu That Remembers Nothing*, this khipu “remembers nothing”; like the khipu that has been forced to forget via colonial violence, *Quipu in the Gutter* seems to be an empty cord, holding no inscription. Instead of holding meaning through knots in its cords, this khipu provokes meaning through the absence of knots, as well as in its precarious installation in a street gutter. The most immediate association is with how the khipu, made to forget, has been metaphorically tossed in the gutter, discarded and forgotten, or mistreated and therefore debased, given the association of *gutter* with *profane* or *filthy*. There is a potential meaning in the emptiness here as well, as with the evocative placement of blank lines or white space in a printed poem; we can similarly read meaning into the absence of obvious markings via knots. Knot presence is known to hold semantic content in khipus; Vicuña indicates there can be meaning in their absence.

Vicuña's assertion is supported by the Inkan concept of zero. Stanislas Dehaene explores the history of the zero, noting that “Mayan astronomers, in the second half of the first millennium, computed with numbers



Figure 1. Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu in the Gutter*, 1990, *ritual performance*, Beach Street, New York. Photo: César Paternosto.

written in a mixture of base 5 and 20 and with a full-fledged digit 0 . . . [but it was] Indian mathematicians, finally, [who] bequeathed humanity the place-value notation in base 10 that is now in use throughout the world.”³⁴ It is notable then that, akin to the Indian base 10 zero, the Inka, who also used base 10 mathematics, *also* had a zero and used place notation in their numerical khipus. Antje Christensen, summarizing Marcia and Robert Ascher, describes the Inkan zero, which was related to “the concept of nothingness” as well as a numerical placeholder in their khipus. The zero *was made through the absence of a knot*, “a cord without knots.”³⁵ The zero was used both as a placeholder in place-value notation—so, a recording of the number 902 would include the 9-knot in the top row of the khipu, an empty space in the next row, and a 2-knot in the bottom row—as well as a number in itself, in which an empty cord in a broader accounting khipu would signify no number, or the absence of other signs: “nothingness is represented by nothingness.”³⁶ Yet, since the Inkan placeholder is marked by a length of cord that is not knotted instead of knotted, we can say that there *is* a sign for zero in the figure of the straight line of thread.

Vicuña’s signification of *nothing*, an empty cord, can also prompt us to reckon with how the absence came to be. There is a distinction between nothingness itself—silence, the absence of speech or language, no cord—and an empty cord, which, like the zero, metasignifies the absence of other signs, as with the distinction between saying nothing and

saying “nothing.” An empty cord can also signify the erasure of inscription through the untying of the knot. Like a zero that is marked because it represents the subtraction of a number from itself, an empty cord can represent the emptiness of remembrance and cultural memory that has been violently erased by colonialism. A harrowing example is given in an account by Pizarro’s conquistadors, who described an Inkan clerk keeping track of goods stolen by conquistadors during wartime looting. As the Spanish stole goods from a city storehouse, the clerk made note of what was taken by tying and untying knots,³⁷ the unknotted thread signifying the absence and loss of specific goods and, more abstractly, colonial theft itself. While this might seem at first to be a poetics of loss and pessimism—the khipu reduced to recording its own erasure—the khipu that signifies “nothing” is a subtle resistance to the cultural genocide perpetrated by Spanish colonizers, an indication that they failed to eradicate meaning from the khipu. This, in turn, indicates an elision in the theory of the purely mathematical khipu, as the recording of a number, zero, is here also the recording of a history.

Vicuña has composed other khipu-based objects that utilize experimental compositional strategies to hold interpretable meaning. The 2006 *Skyscraper Quipu* utilizes a more traditional khipu structure, though one far simpler and more structurally open than khipus tend to be, with large gaps between the secondary cords. The structural openness itself carries meaning and can be read. The emptiness of this khipu, framed by its title and by its cityscape background, performs a flattening that comes with the gridded skyscraper city space. We can note how in the image documentation of the work skyscrapers in the distance appear within the gaps between pendant cords as if they, too, are lines that carry meaning or that indicate what appears in the absence of Indigenous thought—khipu semiotics replaced by the skyscraper, a monumental line dangling across the horizon, a sort of title cord mirroring the khipu’s. Also in 2006, the *Cable Telefónico Quipu* was exhibited at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago, Chile, an abstracted khipu of a single line of knotted multi-colored telephone cable wires. We can note that the knot shape is akin to the knot for the number three that Locke describes—suggesting that the wires all around us that carry data are descendants of number-bearing khipus, wires carrying meaning from here to there as khipus once did.

This intermediation between khipus and other means of meaning-making has a long history. The time between the imposition of Spanish colonial authority and the banning of the khipu saw a proliferation of hybrid khipu/alphabetic texts utilized by Spanish and Catholic authorities in order to communicate and to maintain and enforce social order

in both legal and church settings. For example, a khipu board housed in the Catholic church in Mangas, Peru, blends khipu and alphabetic texts. Knotted threads analogous to pendant cords are fixed via knot to a board that is reminiscent of a slate or poster. Alphabetic text (villagers' names) is inscribed on the board's surface beside each pendant cord, allowing the cords to record each villager's achievement or lack by being pulled taut or left hanging lax. Through these khipu "tabla," villagers' various duties, including observance of religious holidays, feasts, and required labor, were recorded.³⁸ This is not only a blending of alphabetic and khipu inscription but also a blending of the Spanish colonial tribute system and the "labor tax" that was used in the Inka empire, by which citizens would not pay goods or wealth to the state but would instead be required to complete specific labors annually.³⁹ For villagers who could read khipus but who couldn't read written Spanish, the khipu board allowed colonial authorities to exert more efficient social control. Notably, the *title* of the khipu board is only in Spanish, so the context of the board is still only legible to those who can read it, akin to Locke's assumption about the khipu being contextually illegible to others apart from the maker.

Conclusion: The Line and the Line

Many of Vicuña's poetic projects similarly hybridize khipus and alphabetic semiosis. One of these projects is in *QUIPOem*, a book documenting some of Vicuña's threadwork installations, printed semi-dos-à-dos with M. Catherine de Zegher's anthology *The Precarious*. Vicuña returns to the themes of *Quipu That Remembers Nothing* and *Quipu in the Gutter* at the opening the book, where she writes, in printed text, "The quipu that remembers nothing, an empty cord," a line of text that interrupts a hand-drawn line that, following the text, begins to expand into handwritten text emerging from the line, "is the core," which then again gives way to printed text on the verso: "the heart of memory" (fig. 2).⁴⁰ There is a mingling of thread, line, and word. The empty thread of the khipu is figured as a line in the book, metaphorically rendered as a drawn line with text appearing as loose knots—the thread crossing as it forms a "t," the tenuous loop of a thread-written "h" or "e." Thread as line of text recurs later in the book, in "Sendero Chibcha," where images of thread crisscrossing an environment are connected with lines of text that spread outward away from the image, the thread continuous with language. The line appears again late in *QUIPOem*, in the poem "Ceq'e" ("line" in Quechua), in which Vicuña composes a sort of calligram, lines

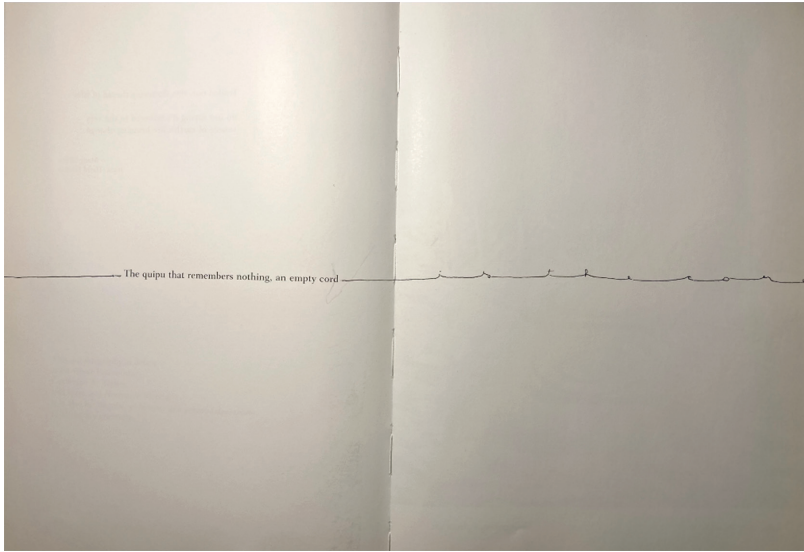


Figure 2. Cecilia Vicuña, from *QUIPOem*, 1997, trans. Esther Allen, published by Wesleyan University Press.

of text spoking out radially from a sphere of white space, evoking a khipu arranged in a semicircle, which is how many are displayed in European museums. The final three lines here are flipped vertically on the page, indicating that the poem might be readable from multiple directions, or perhaps indicating the presence of stanza analogues.

Within the colonial context of their semiotic encounter, the line of a khipu becomes the line of alphabetic text in a performance of how the latter has violently displaced the former as the predominant mode of sharing inscribed language in the Andes; but instead of acceding to this displacement, Vicuña makes the former legible in some small way through intermediations with written language. The very title of the book, *QUIPOem*, suggests such an amalgamation. We can see this blending in Vicuña's poetry performances as well. Dennis Tedlock writes that during Vicuña's performances "her fingers make a loom" not only in terms of the literal thread she weaves around and through the audience during these performances, or the metaphorical threads holding them together, but also in terms of language itself: "[S]he reads the threads for syllables."⁴¹ She also does this more literally by linking khipus and poetry through their shared structure, the *line*. Both the line of a poem and the line-cord of a khipu hold meanings that are uncovered through readerly performance; they are semiautonomous units that make up a larger whole comprised of multiple instances of them; their forms deceptively suggest

linearity while shirking off linear encounters; they have a clear beginning and ending but with the potential for these to slip over into a subsequent line or thread.

I wish to acknowledge that the semiotic encounters between alphabetic and khipu languages we find first within Spanish colonial alphabetic-khipu hybrids and later in Vicuña's hybrid-semiotic poetics occur within analogous semiotic contact zones. They both aim to deploy alphabetic language to understand and utilize Indigenous khipu-based inscription practices. They both occur as the result of an encounter between an Indigenous semiosis and a colonial one. And they both result in intermediational texts that draw on and metaphorize elements from both Spanish and khipus in order to forge a connection between them. But where colonial hybrids stage encounters that aim to subsume one semiotic system beneath another—in which the colonial and racist hierarchy of colonizer over colonized is mapped onto semiotics and epistemology—the hybrid poetics we find in Vicuña's work instead brush up against each other, inform and inflect one another, but without the demand to know, to control, or to dictate. In place of the colonial demand that Indigenous semiosis submit, be eradicated, or be intermediated with colonial language and colonial desires, Vicuña's intermediations of text and thread, alphabet and knot, thread line and text line, proffers a hope that such seemingly lost practices might be reunderstood or rearticulated—that, to borrow from José Esteban Muñoz, Indigenous inscription practices might not be fully assimilated, or rejected, but disidentified⁴² into something new.

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NOTES

1. This hyphenated stylization is how Vicuña writes the place-name in *Spit Temple*, ed. and trans. Rosa Alcalá (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012). Elsewhere, in the essay "River Rail" for *Brooklyn Rail*, she stylizes it differently as two separate words, "Con cón," and indicates that the doubled name is truer to the Indigenous roots of the place name, "water," as it lies at an intersection of rivers. "Con Cón, Chile, 1966–2006," *River Rail*, Brooklyn Rail, October 2022, https://brooklynrail.org/special/RIVER_RAIL/river-rail/Con-cn-Chile-1966-2006.
2. Vicuña, *Spit Temple*, 55.
3. The spelling of this word varies: it can be "khipu," "quipu," or, more archaically, "quipo." Throughout this article, I use "khipu," which is how the word is spelled in contemporary

Quechua following the 1975 standardization of the Quechua alphabet and subsequent alphabetic revisions. “Quipu” and the archaic “quipo” are Spanish-influenced spellings. Most works on Vicuña by poetry and literature scholars use the “quipo” spelling, likely out of deference to Vicuña’s own spelling, but I am instead choosing to use the spelling more in alignment with anthropological use and contemporary Quechua spelling.

4. Similar to the distinction between “quipu” and “khipu,” the distinction between “Inca” and “Inka” is one of linguistic origin or influence: the “k” of “Inka” follows, as with the “kh” of “khipu,” the spelling shift resulting from the standardization of Quechua through the end of the twentieth century. As with “khipu,” the spelling “Inka” is often favored in anthropological texts. The spelling choice is somewhat moot, however, since the term itself isn’t fully accurate, regardless of spelling, as Indigenous people of the time of the Inka Empire wouldn’t have called their nation Inka, but Tawantinsuyu, in reference to the four realms, provinces, and geographical areas of the empire.
5. *Quipus/Quipus*, Cecilia Vicuña, accessed March 10, 2020, <http://www.ceciliavicuna.com/quipus>.
6. *Quipu in the Gutter*, Cecilia Vicuña, accessed March 10, 2020, <http://www.ceciliavicuna.com/quipus/4uol6s3m3ru5onyu97e7zznqe2d98j>.
7. *Skyscraper Quipu*, Cecilia Vicuña, accessed March 10, 2020, <http://www.ceciliavicuna.com/quipus/0anehovoabwkrkfkwsj6qt78113tml>.
8. L. Leland Locke, *The Ancient Quipu or Peruvian Knot Record* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1923).
9. William J. Conklin, “A Khipu Information String Theory,” in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu*, ed. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 53–86, quotation on 77.
10. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 82.
11. Ong, 83.
12. Ong, 83.
13. Ong, 83.
14. Ong, 83.
15. Ong, 83.
16. Frank Salomon, “How an Andean ‘Writing without Words’ Works,” *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2001): 1–27, quotation on 2.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
18. Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
19. Charles C. Mann, “Cracking the Khipu Code,” *Science*, June 13, 2003, 1650–51, quotation on 1651.
20. Salomon, “How an Andean,” 2.
21. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 83.
22. Sabine Hyland, Gene A. Ware, and Madison Clark, “Knot Direction in a Khipu/Alphabetic Text from the Central Andes,” *Latin American Antiquity* 25, no. 2 (2014): 189–97.
23. Hyland, Ware, and Clark.

24. Hyland, Ware, and Clark.
25. Sabine Hyland, "Festival Threads: Khipu Calendars and Mercedarian Missions in Rapaz, Peru (c. 1565–1825)," *Catholic Historical Review* 107, no. 1 (2021): 119–47.
26. Gary Urton, "Tying the Truth in Knots: Trustworthiness and Accountability in the Inka Khipu," in *Deception: Methods, Motives, Contexts, and Consequences*, ed. Brooke Harrington (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 152–82, quotation on 174.
27. Urton describes this in another essay, "From Knots to Narratives," by comparing competing accounts of khipu utilization in the Spanish colonial courts. While Alonso Yanxi, a khipukamayuc from Sacaca, describes the process as trusted and infallible, Juan de Solórzano y Pereyra writes: "I would not venture to give any or such great faith and authority to the quipos, because I have heard it said . . . that the manner of making and explaining them is very uncertain, deceitful and convoluted. . . . When all is said and done, they are Indians, whose faith vacillates, and thus also, they will equivocate in the explication they give of their quipos" (430).
28. Urton, 431.
29. Mann, "Cracking the Khipu Code," offers a distressing account of the khipu's repression by colonial authorities:
 In the late 16th century, Spanish travelers in central Peru ran into an old Indian [*sic*] man, probably a former official of the Incan empire, which Francisco Pizarro had conquered in 1532. The Spaniards saw the Indian try to hide something he was carrying, according to the account of one traveler, Diego Avalos y Figueroa, so they searched him and found several bunches of the cryptic knotted strings known as khipu. Many khipu simply recorded columns of numbers for accounting or census purposes, but the conquistadors believed that some contained historical narratives, religious myths, even poems. In this case, the Indian claimed that his khipu recorded everything the conquerors had done in the area, "both the good and evil." The leader of the Spanish party . . . immediately "took and burned these accounts and punished the Indian" for having them. (1650).
30. Urton, "From Knots to Narratives," 410.
31. Denise Newman, "Poetry between, among, and in the Midst," *World Literature Today* (August 2015): 6–7, quotation on 6.
32. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 111.
33. Bryan-Wilson, 111.
34. Stanislas Dehaene, *The Number Sense: How the Mind Creates Mathematics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100.
35. Antje Christensen, "The Incan Quipus," *Synthese* 133, no. ½ (2002), 159–72, quotation on 165.
36. Christensen, 166.
37. Frank Salomon, *The Cord Keepers: Khipus and Cultural Life in a Peruvian Village* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 110.
38. Hyland, Ware, and Clark, 189–97.
39. Gary Urton and Carrie J. Brezine, "Khipu Accounting in Ancient Peru," *Science*, August 12, 2005, 1065.

40. Cecilia Vicuña, *QUIPOem*, trans. Esther Allen (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).
41. Dennis Tedlock, "Handspun Syllables / Handwoven Words," in *Spit Temple*, ed. and trans. Rosa Alcalá (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), 287.
42. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).