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The Importance of Poetry as a Didactic and Political Tool in Poems by Three Mapuche Poets

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An eruption of poetry written by indigenous Mapuche communities in Chile began in the 1980's. One of the main figures in this eruption is Elicura Chihuailaf, who writes both in Spanish and Mapudungun, one of many Mapuche dialects in Chile.¹ Chihuailaf has stated that his literary production lies in needing to “achieve dignity, of preserving and restoring for—and by—our own selves the soul of our people.”(Vicuña 1998: 25). One clear example of this preservation is found in the poem “Sueño azul” (“Blue Dream”) where he writes: “Pero guardé en mi memoria el contenido/ de los dibujos/ que hablaban de la creación y resurgimiento del/ mundo Mapuche/ de fuerzas protectoras, de volcanes, de flores y aves”(Chihuailaf 1998: 44). (“But in my memory I kept the content of designs/ that spoke of creation and of the resurgence of the/ Mapuche world/ of protective powers, of volcanoes, of flowers and/ birds”) (Bierhorst 1998:45).

Critics from the 1990s to the present have studied various aspects of Mapuche poetry. Some, for example, have looked at how the Mapuche's orality, that is, their traditional way of passing on their social memory, has been compromised and tarnished by the act of writing.² Others have analyzed the connection between Mapuche poetry and its connection to current eco-political cases in southern Chile.³ Despite all of these important studies, critics have not analyzed the didactic effort put forth by Mapuche poets, which include, but are not limited to, teaching Mapudungun to their readers, and describing the Mapuche community's worldview. In doing so, the poets are creating a counter-discourse to continually imposed Western ideals about spirituality, consumerism and societal norms, among others.

¹ Some people spell it Mapuzungun. For the purposes of this essay, I am using Mapudungun.

² For examples of this see Crow.

³ See Cárcamo-Huechante for a further analysis of this topic.

For Chihuailaf and two other Mapuche poets: Jaime Luis Huenún and Graciela Huinao, language plays an important political, social and cultural role in their literary production. Language is an integral part in the post-colonial voice because it, as Bill Ashcroft et al. assert, “Becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (Ashcroft 2003: 7). Language shapes the poet’s post-colonial voice as an effective means of subverting repressive Western principles.

These poets’ works, which represent marginalized Mapuche populations, also have a political agenda that aims to gain recognition from the Chilean government. Macarena Gómez-Barris claims that Cecilia Vicuña’s 1998 anthology of Mapuche poetry “does little to ameliorate the conditions of precariousness experienced by most contemporary urban and rural Mapuches” (Gómez-Barris 2009: 124) and while this is a valid point, the poetry that is produced in the anthology, on which this paper looks at three, argues vehemently against state sponsored oppression, terror and racism.⁴ On this topic, Joanna Crow recognizes that Mapuche poetry has been “mainstreamed,” and that its political causes have been ignored and ideologically manipulated to create a seemingly homogenous Chilean society (Crow 2008: 222). While these critics’ efforts have thrown light on important aspects of Mapuche political and social struggles they neglect to mention how these poets strategically use their art as a didactic tool created, in part, as a counter- discourse to both neoliberal multiculturalism and neoliberal policies in Chile.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Chihuailaf, Huenún and Huinao, all writing from different marginal, gender and political positions, use their poems for didactic and political purposes in order to shift to what Walter Mignolo calls “decoloniality.” This term “means both the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective tasks of contributing to build a world in which many worlds coexist” (Mignolo 2012: 54). Mignolo speaks of decoloniality as a way to explore alternative non-Western modernities so that neo-colonized persons, in this case the Mapuches of Chile, can express and share their marginalized cultural views in order to break away from their hegemonic oppressor. One keen example of this can be found in Huinao’s works because her poetry nostalgically looks back to the colonial period in

⁴ For an excellent study on political Mapuche hunger acts see Gómez-Barris.

order to demonstrate how this affects her as a Spanish-speaking Huilliche woman living in the densely populated capital city, Santiago.⁵ I also choose Mignolo's term because it rejects capitalism as the only means of production and consumer goals. More specifically, he touches on indigenous visions of the world and how these do not always coincide with the Western notion of development or commodities:

The most striking and less understood by liberal, neoliberal, postmodern, and Marxist tendencies (in general), are indigenous/Native American sustained decolonial arguments that connect land with spirituality and not with commodity, and which also disconnect 'buen vivir/to live in harmony' from development (Mignolo 2012: 63).

Some of Chihuailaf's poetry reflects this idea because it is known for being nostalgic for a spiritual past. One can see this in "Sueño azul" ("Blue Dream") where he recalls: "Sentado en las rodillas de mi abuela oí las/ primeras historias de árboles/ y piedras que dialogan entre sí, con los/ animales y con la gente" (Chihuailaf 1998: 42)/ (Seated in my grandmother's lap I first heard the stories/ of trees/ and stones that talk to animals, to humans, / and to one another) (Bierhorst 1998: 43). As we will see below Chihuailaf also uses his nostalgia for political and didactic purposes.

The three authors that I analyze in this paper all have in common the project of creating and utilizing a "decolonial scientia" that Mignolo defines as a tool that "twist[s] the politics of knowledge in which they were educated as modern subjects and modern subjectivities (Mignolo 2012: 114). Chihuailaf, Huenún and Huinao use decolonial scientia to educate their readers about diverse Mapuche communities, its varied sources of cultural and social production. What I mean by varied sources of production is that while these three authors have several themes in common, we cannot assume that their cultural output is by any means homogeneous. For example, while all three have been translated into Spanish and English, Chihuailaf predominantly writes in Mapudungun while Huinao is an urban Huilliche who does not speak any indigenous language. This does not mean that her literary production is "less" Mapuche than Chihuailaf's or

⁵ Huilliche is a term used for indigenous peoples from Southern Chile; originally from the island of Chiloé.

Huenún's because, as Bill Ashcroft et. al. have noted, "the crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre [Spanish, in this case] and re-placing it in a *discourse* fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ashcroft 2003: 37). That is, Huinao uses Spanish to exhibit and examine the injustices done by the hegemonic culture to her native peoples both in colonial and present times. Huenún also does not speak Mapudungun, but his Spanish-language poems speak to Mapuches like him that are caught in-between two cultures.

Let us first look at Chihuailaf, who was born near Temuco, Chile in 1952. The poet has traveled to many countries outside of Chile. This, in my opinion, means that he is not writing just to Mapuches, but rather metaphorically painting strokes with Mapuche "colors" on a once exclusively Western literary canvas. One color that he repeatedly uses is blue because as Crow asserts "blue has positive connotations in Mapuche culture (and Chihuailaf brings it to many of his poems): it [is] the most important colour, because it represents the origins of life" (Crow 2008: 234). Chihuailaf's poem "Sueño Azul" ("Blue Dream") represents his beginnings.

First, it is important to note that Chihuailaf writes primarily in Mapudungun that to him means, "nothing less than opening one's eyes and hearing (speaking) our (my) true language, except that . . . it could no longer be presented to my brothers and sisters in just the single language"(Vicuña 1998: 25). The poet refers here to the loss of his people's indigenous language due to colonization. By writing in Mapudungun and Spanish, Chihuailaf has changed the terms of the hegemonic discourse. His linguistic choice creates a dialogue between two cultures that can interact through his poetry. In Cecilia Vicuña's edition of Chihuailaf's poems, his poems are further translated into English, which further opens his poetry and messages to a wider audience.

Let us first look at the title of this poem: "Sueño Azul," which can mean both "Blue Dream" and "I Dream of Blue." The title in Spanish lends itself to various multiple meanings. In the first interpretation of the title ("Blue Dream"), Chihuailaf dreams of his childhood home and in the latter ("I Dream of Blue"), he weaves himself into his ancestral beginnings by dreaming of blue, that is, dreaming of the origins of his life and those of his people. Dreaming and remembering are important to several Mapuche communities as it is for many societies. On this topic Maurice Halbwachs asserts, "one

may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs 1992:40). Halbwachs is not claiming that the individual can declare to know the realities of every member of the group, but rather, that some memories (like ritual and gastronomical practices, for example) are shared in a collective social memory by a single member and the whole group. For Chihuailaf, dreaming of his past and those of his ancestors allows his readers to observe and learn about a childhood filled with indigenous ways of viewing the world.

“Sueño Azul” (“Blue Dream”) encapsulates the idea of using a decolonial *scientia* to teach both his people and his readers about Mapuche names for the seasons and their role on Earth, natural remedies, and ideas about the afterlife. Chihuailaf warns his readers: “Hablo de la memoria de mi niñez y no de una/ sociedad idílica/ Allí me parece, aprendí lo que era la poesía/ las grandezas de la vida cotidiana, pero sobre todo/sus detalles/el destello del fuego, de los ojos, de las manos” (Chihuailaf 1998: 42)/ (“I am not speaking of an idyllic society but of memories/ from my childhood/ There it seems to me I learned what poetry was/ the grandeur of everyday life, and especially/ its details/ the shine of firelight, of eyes, of hands”) (Bierhorst 1998: 43). Even with this warning, many of Chihuailaf’s critics have accused him of romanticizing Mapuches in his poetry.⁶ This may be due to the critics’ oversight of Chihuailaf’s didactic and political agenda. The style of his poetry is purposefully written in prose style so that one can imagine the poetic voice as one that speaks directly to the reader. In this way, Chihuailaf’s poetry becomes more oral and, subsequently, more in tune with the Mapuche tradition of orality. This is one of the reasons why the poet calls his literary production *oralitura*, which is a mixture of both orality and literature. The poet’s decolonial *scientia* is further exemplified in the following lines: “Como mis hermanos y hermanas—más de una/ vez-- - intenté aprender este arte [tejer], sin éxito/ Pero guardé en mi memoria el contenido/ de los dibujos/ que hablaban de la creación y resurgimiento del/ mundo Mapuche” (Chihuailaf 1998: 44). (“Like my brothers and sisters—more than once—I tried/ to learn that art [weaving], without success/ But in my memory I kept the content of designs/ that spoke of creation and of the resurgence of the/ Mapuche world) (Bierhorst 1998: 45). If

⁶ For a further analysis of how Chihuailaf’s poetry is misread see Crow.

we think back to Halbwach's notion of collective memory, here we see how the poetic voice keeps both his people's spiritual beliefs and the images in his memory and now in writing so that his individual memory now becomes part of a collective memory through the art of writing or *oralitura* and is shared with his readers to convey both the continual loss of that memory and intent to pass it on.

Chihuailaf also discusses Mapuche ideology of natural remedies and land in the poem. The poetic voice nostalgically remembers how his grandparents would talk to him about the function of certain plants and their respective remedies: "La menta para el estomago, el toronjil para/la pena/ el matico para el hígado" (Chihuailaf 1998: 46); (Mint for the stomach, balm for/ pain/ *matico* for the liver and for wounds/ *coralillo* for the kidney) (Bierhorst 1998: 47). This list of remedies serves to remind his people and inform his readers of natural ways of caring for the self. Chihuailaf's list also moves away from modern medicines, which implies that his vision moves away from the overconsumption of capitalist goods. In another stanza he recalls that his grandparents would say to him "la Tierra no pertenece a la gente/ Mapuche significa Gente de la Tierra" (Chihuailaf 1998: 46); (The earth does not belong to humans/ Mapuche means 'People of the Land.) (Bierhorst 1998: 47). As readers we are taught about the Mapuche worldview in this verse and it is one of the techniques Chihuailaf uses in his poetry to decolonize his people because in the subtext of this poem he asks: Who does the land belong to? If the Earth belongs to nobody, then those that claim to own it are oppressors. Chihuailaf is not the only Mapuche poet that raises important questions and issues like these.

The Mapuche poet Jaime Luis Huenún raises the issue of heterogeneity within Chilean culture. His poetry, in his own words, is a "dialogue of conflict between two races, two cultures" (Vicuña 1998: 87). In a way, Huenún views his poetry as part of what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the "borderlands", which are characterized by "wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory" and where different social classes meet (Anzaldúa 2007: 19). The borderlands are a highly conflict-ridden space for Huenún. He considers himself a cultural mestizo and constantly straddles the line between his Spanish-speaking Chilean self and as Mapuche "Other." One clear example of this conflict can be seen in "Después de leer

tanto a César Vallejo” (“After Reading so Much Cesar Vallejo”) where the poetic voice imagines talking to the Peruvian poet named in the title: “El mundo se concentra en tu índice, César/y acusa a mis poemas de no tener/ ni la más remota filiación/ con tus jueves parisinos”(Huenún 1998: 106); (“The world is concentrated in your pointing finger, César/ and it accuses my poems of bearing/ not the slightest relationship/ to your Parisian Thursdays”) (Bierhorst 1998: 107). Even though Vallejo was nicknamed “el cholo” (a person of mixed blood), here Huenún’s stance towards the Peruvian indicates that Huenún still considers himself the “Other” when confronted by Vallejo’s avante garde poetry. By doing so, Huenún creates a dialogue between Latin American writers and himself in order to demonstrate his marginalized position and how this empowers the rest of his work.⁷

In the third stanza he position himself as the “new” poet when remarking: “pero sabes que desde hace tiempo ya/ que las cunas hieden a sepulcro” (Huenún 1998: 106); (“Yet you’ve know for some time/ that the cradle reeks of the tomb”) (Bierhorst 1998: 107). Huenún also recognizes here that his poetry begins where Vallejo’s has left off; his poetry symbolically stands in a contested space between perceiving his poetry as a copy of Vallejo’s and one that strives to stand on its own. Interestingly, Huenún’s poem seems to dialogue directly with Vallejo’s poem titled “Traspié entre dos estrellas” (“Stumble between Two Stars”). In the fifth stanza of Vallejo’s posthumous poem the poetic voice declares: “¡Amado sea/el que tiene hambre o sed, pero no tiene/ hambre con qué saciar toda su sed,/ ni sed con qué saciar todas sus hambres!”; (“Beloved be/the one who thirsts or hungers, but who doesn’t have hunger to satiate all his thirst,/nor thirst to satiate all his hungers!”) (Vallejo 2005: 249). Huenún’s poem seems to reply to Vallejo’s praise: “Así mismo, sabes que de ti aprendí a saciar la sed/ con toda el hambre humana soportable” (Huenún 1998: 106); (“As you know that I learned from you to quench thirst/ with all manner of human hunger”) (Bierhorst 1998: 107). While Vallejo’s poem exalts the lower classes, Huenún takes his poem one step further and, as part of a marginalized group, actually gives voice to those belonging to the lower social classes. “Después de leer tanto César Vallejo” (“After Reading So Much César Vallejo”) demonstrates how a subject

⁷ See Cárcamo-Huechante for an analysis of Huenún’s poetry in dialogue with *Modernismo* and Parnassian poetry.

taught within the context of Western ideology can move forward with their literary production to include a contestation of that colonial past. He uses Spanish, to create a literary space for Mapuche-Huilliche people.

In the last stanza, the poetic voice laments: “Lo único que lamento/ es que no vas a poder devolverme la mano/ en ninguno de estos caminos/ donde llueve soledad” (Huenún 1998: 106); (“All I regret/is that you cannot be there to raise your/ hand against me on any of these roads/ through the rainfall of loneliness”) (Bierhorst 1998: 107). Huenún recognizes here that his poetic oeuvre dovetails Vallejo’s in that it interacts with the Other: the poor, the subaltern, and the mis-represented. Huenún uses decolonial scientia that gains inspiration from other culturally mixed Latin American poets, turning this poem both into a dialogue with Mapuche cultures and a greater political call for recognition of cultural mestizos in the Americas.

Another poet that has overt political tones in her works is Graciela Huinao. In “Simulacro de biografía” (“Semblance of a Biography”) Huinao, like Chihuailaf and Huenún, uses a prose-like poetry to inform both Mapuche and non-Mapuche peoples of her struggles as a Huilliche Spanish-speaking woman. The title itself (“Simulacro de biografía”) alludes to this: even though she traces her life from her birth to her present marginalized life in “un barrio marginal de Santiago” (Huinao 1998: 144) (an outer barrio of Santiago) the title reminds her readers that this biography is only a semblance of one. This is not just her biography, but also that of Huilliche Mapuches like her. Huinao, like her tribe, has suffered from racism, discrimination, hunger and nostalgia. In this way Huinao’s poem becomes a Halbwachsian collective biography of her people.

For the reasons stated above, her poem reads almost like a *testimonio*, where the narration “has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself” (Beverley 2004: 32). Huinao uses decolonial scientia to denounce social ignorance and criticize not only what has happened to her, personally, but also to her people as a collective.

Huinao’s prose poem functions as an urgent message alerting the reader of ongoing repression. The poetic voice remembers, “Mi pelo negro me relegó a los puestos de atrás” (Huinao 1998: 142); (“My dark skin relegated me to the seats in the rear”)

(Bierhorst 1998: 143). The Spanish version alludes to her being discriminated because of her black hair, but the English translation blames it on her dark skin. Regardless of this difference what is important to note is that Huinao speaks out against discrimination based on race.

Huinao also denounces the hunger her family and people suffered when referring to it as a burglar that entered her house first and later the rest of city: “El norte se divisaba negro, y el año 77/ entró en mi casa, por la puerta que más duele, y cuando/ se le hizo pequeña mi casa, salió a las calles, dejando/ de par en par las puertas abiertas de mi ciudad, por la/ razón más desbocada que persigue a todo animal:/El hambre (Huinao 1998: 142); (“The North revealed itself in blackness, and the/ year 1977 came into my house by the door that hurts most,/ and when my house became too small, it went into the streets, leaving the doors/of my city wide open, for the/wildest of reasons that hunts down every animal:/ Hunger”) (Bierhorst 1998:143). The year 1977 represents a period of time that economically affected Huinao’s city. The North, in relation to the south of Chile, often refers to the capital city, Santiago, but here it ambiguously refers to something else. It is possible that Huinao refers to the *coup d’etat* that occurred on September 11, 1973 in Chile. If this is the case, then the hunger Huinao discusses was caused by Augusto Pinochet’s repressive dictatorship. What is also interesting about this stanza is how it is reminiscent of Argentinean Julio Cortázar’s short story “Casa tomada” (“House Taken Over”) in which the reader also notices an ambiguous presence literally taking over the home of two siblings. In this way, Huinao continues a technique used by authors, like Cortázar, to speak against repressive regimes while ambiguity protects that speech.

In the last stanza of “Simulacro de biografía” (“Semblance of a Biography”) the poetic voice nostalgically remembers “EL SUR” (Huinao 1998: 144) / “THE SOUTH” (Bierhorst 1998: 145). This is done within the confines of a marginal barrio in Santiago. As she reminds her readers “todos los días echo/a cuestras mis raíces mientras mis ojos acarician la distancia entre yo y mi amante” (Huinao 1998: 144); (“all the days shoulder/ the weight of my origins while my eyes caress the distance/ between me and my lover”) (Bierhorst 1998: 145). The lover she refers to is her beloved South and it is a symbolic space that reminds Huinao of her and her people’s origins.

As we can see from this analysis, all three poets utilize their poetry as a way to heal from and fight against neo-coloniality. Critics who prefer a nationalistic and romantic view of Chile's past often misread Chihuailaf's poetry. His poetry does have a political slant to inform readers of his indigenous community. Huenún on the other hand uses the borderlands between Mapuches and non-indigenous Chileans to highlight how his struggle to overcome the symptom of being the Other has created a dialogue between himself and other culturally mestizo writers.

Lastly Huinao sheds light on repression and hunger from her marginalized linguistic, cultural and gendered position. In a way, all three authors seem to employ a decolonial spirituality that "is not only confronting modernity but also proposing to delink from it" (Mignolo 2012: 63). This is a spirituality that also hopes to detach itself from consumerism and capitalism. In none of the poems seen here do the authors directly mention excessive material goods or commodities and in this way they are also positioning themselves against Western modernity and neo-colonialization.

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