Chilex:
The Economy of Transnational Media Culture

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Pinochet

> Chilex, Felipe, Chilex is the real country. Everything is exportable, everything's for sale even the people.
>
> -- Ariel Dorfman in *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*

Ariel Dorfman's second novel in exile narrates the fate of a dystopic world named Chilex: a country whose authoritarian and capitalist-oriented leaders have turned the nation into pure commodity. The imaginary product of David (an exile) and his friends, Chilex is the subject of a comic strip. It is a fictive vision of Chile under Pinochet constructed by exiles who are coming to terms, in various ways, with the legacy the dictator has left their country. *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero* is a rich, complex novel offering visions of both hope and despair. Yet, looking back on the text published in 1987, the uncanny resemblance between Dorfman's nightmarish narrative of a possible future for his country -- Chilex -- and the practical realities of Chile is perhaps more a sign of despair than of hope.

The novel narrated this dystopia as a function of ongoing authoritarian rule instead of as a consequence of the transition to democracy. Even more disheartening, then, is the fact that the return of "democracy" has not meant a more equitable restructuring of social relations. In fact "democracy" in Chile has been contingent on maintaining the economic status quo. Pinochet's move from head of the military to Senator-for-Life in March of 1998 reminded the international community of the guarantees the ex-dictator secured in

order to protect him from accounting for his regime's human rights violations. Yet there is much more to the story than an ex-dictator's fear of imprisonment. Understanding his legacy requires insight into his manipulation of the social consciousness, an act far more insidious than seeking exemption from judicial process. When Pinochet decided to overthrow Allende, he put the nation on the auction block. Over twenty-five years later practically everything has been sold.

As Marc Cooper explains: "Pinochet's dictatorship may have been voted out of office by the 1988 plebiscite, but his economic and political model has triumphed" (12). The ex-dictator of Chile, then, did far more than disrupt one of the longest standing democracies of the region. The Pinochet of secret military police, torture, and reactionary politics is, arguably, not the most historically significant version. Within the economic logic of Chile today, Pinochet still rules and he consequently controls, through the legacy of his ideology, the cultural profile of Chilean society. The popular young writer Alberto Fuguet explains: "Where Pinochet did triumph, it seems, was with us kids. We bought the line that politics was bad. We grew up de-politicized" (23). In this way, the persistence of Pinochet transcends the worst expectations of his enemies. Leftist intellectuals in Chile today no longer confront censorship from the regime, but, instead, face the political apathy and materialist desire of a public mesmerized by Chilean capitalism. Without the obvious threat of political reprisals, intellectuals have found that they face an even more daunting challenge -- competing with the social seduction of transnational media culture.

In a telling example from Dorfman's *Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, a television program, *Search, Search*, symbolizes one of the most bewitching ways that entertainment thwarts resistance. The program advertises that it can solve all problems. Moreover, its title, *Search, Search*, seems to refer to the "disappearance" of loved ones, and, like much advertising, follows its promise with a media blitz which leaves its viewers dazed and confused. That Dorfman's Chilex epitomized an authoritarian government's absolute control over media as a means for disseminating the regime's ideology registers today as a simple foreshadowing of the current state of Chile's cultural economy. Various critics, notably Marc Cooper in his article "General Pinochet Still Rules," have observed that, in Chile, democracy has only meant a further corporatization of cultural production.

As testimony to the closing rather than opening of Chilean cultural forms, on July 24, 1998, *La Epoca*, the main newspaper to challenge *El Mercurio*, which is aligned most closely with the government, went out of print. While oppositional newspapers like *El Punto Final* -- a weekly communist publication -- exist, with the loss of *La Epoca*, *El Mercurio* now dominates daily newsprint, sharing market with other dailies that are primarily tabloids. Given that *La Epoca* was founded by Emilio Filippi with the express intent of providing the Chilean public with an alternative to Pro-Pinochet news from the perspective of the centrist Christian Democrat party, its closure not under dictatorship but under the presidential leadership of the party it supported is even more revealing of the current cultural crisis in Chile. According to novelist, Carlos Franz, the demise of *La Epoca* was ostensibly financial but transparently political. In a letter discussing the impact of losing *La Epoca* for Chile's intellectual and cultural community he explains: "In my opinion, for Chilean intellectuals, the disappearance of *La Epoca* is a disaster. We

are under the power of an informational oligopoly, controlled, for the most part, by the extreme right. This complicates and contains the work of an author who would like to write for an independent, and progressive, press."[1]

Regarding other cultural forms, in the film world there has been a resurgence in Chilean national cinema due to heightened transnational production efforts. In 1993, the international film festival in Viña del Mar was reborn. Yet the festival, which started with the late Aldo Francia's effort to bring subversive, leftist filmmakers from across Latin America together in a spirit of collaboration to exchange ideas and screen films, is now a glitzy, star-studded private affair. The Viña del Mar Festival began in the late 60s and coincided with the New Latin American Cinema Movement. Chile was a central player in the subversive film movement with a national film industry dedicated to Socialist and Marxist cinema founded by Allende and government funded from 1971 to 1973. After the coup, the Chilean film industry was virtually non-existent with most Chilean filmmakers working in exile. Today, the pressure of censorship no longer exists-yet neither does the political climate of the 60s. The consequence is that national movie theaters primarily screen Hollywood films.[2]

Evidence of the problematic role of Chilean cinema in Chile is found in the recent controversy over awarding Raúl Ruiz the *Premio Nacional de las Artes de la Representación y Audiovisuales* [*The National Prize for Arts of Representation and the Audiovisual*] on December 9, 1998.[3] Ruiz, director of over 100 films, is virtually unknown in Chile. Exiled to France in 1973, Ruiz continued to work in film over the years amassing a corpus which has attracted the international filmophile community, motivating a number of scholarly assessments of his work. His anonymity in Chile ended when the Chilean government decided to honor his work and coincided interestingly with the completion of *Shattered Image*, Ruiz's first film produced in Hollywood. Regarding Chilean national cinema the question of whether the industry is experiencing a resurgence remains debatable. In "El lento despertar del cine chileno" ["The Slow Awakening of Chilean Cinema"] Erika Contreras notes that the five national films screened in Chile in 1998 had a limited impact.[4] The success of Chilean cinema has been greatly affected by competition with Hollywood as well as by a general disinterest in viewing films that represent the past.

Other arenas of cultural production are also under close corporate control. Publishing is now big business thanks to the New Chilean Narrative, a group of writers largely in their thirties who have set a new tone for Chilean prose in a country known for poets. The increased presence of *Editorial Planeta Chilena*, a subsidiary of the well-established Spanish publishing house *Planeta*, has signaled a centralized print business. Established in Chile in 1968, *Planeta* has had a tremendous influence on the print industry. For almost a decade (since the 1990 elections), *Planeta* set the tone for literature, choosing sexy covers, improving the readability of layout, and marketing its authors. Its goal after the elections was clear: To instigate a decisive push in the area of Chilean Narrative. The *Planeta* website states: "Surgieron así, escritores que han alcanzado con sus novelas y libros de cuentos cuotas de difusión y popularidad sin precedentes."[5] [As a consequence,

writers have achieved through their novels and short stories levels of distribution and popularity without precedent."]

Regarding the possibilities for Chilean culture during the transition only in the realm of literature has there been "a true national movement" and it is a cultural resurgence often attributed to the role of *Planeta*.(Recart 63) Alluding to the commercial nature of this cultural enterprise, Paula Recart explains that the authors representing the New Chilean Narrative have been referred to as "Los más vendidos", which in Spanish carries a double meaning -- the bestsellers or the sell-outs. Despite the aesthetic accomplishments of these writers, their role (use) in marketing Chilean narrative exposes much about the pervasive presence of commodity culture. Today *Planeta* shares its hold over literary publishing with other major houses such as *Editorial Grijalbo Chile*, an affiliate of *Grijalbo-Mondadori* based in Barcelona. In what reads like a textbook description of neo-colonial economics, *Grijalbo* in Chile explains that in the early 1990s it began to publish local writers, both new and known, quickly transforming itself into a major multinational publishing corporation with a significant "local" presence.6 The obvious consequence of these changes in editorial economics in Chile for small, locally operated publishers has been an inability to compete in the marketplace. Authors unwilling to work with the large houses remain largely unknown, unread, and unpublished.

The economic miracle that Pinochet brought to Chile is more aptly an economic nightmare. Embodying the tenets of neo-liberal economics Chile, since the coup, has increasingly allied itself with the rules of free market economy in direct contrast to the attempt to nationalize industry under Allende. Neo-liberal policies have spread throughout Latin America, where the model of Chile's economy serves as an example. Elizabeth Martínez and Arnoldo García point out that "The first clear example of neo-liberalism at work came in Chile (with thanks to University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman), after the CIA-supported coup against the popularly elected Allende regime in 1973." Twenty-five years of neo-liberal economics later, Chile boasts one of the worst poverty rates in the world and the most centralized control of assets and would like to be the next member of NAFTA. Based on U.S. foreign policy the possibilities appear favorable.

An individualistic economy, aimed at undermining any sense of collective or community, characterizes the Chilean economic landscape, where middle-class Chileans stand in malls while speaking on cellular phones and waiting in line to pick up dinner at Pizza Hut. This picture, of course, is not the picture of Chile most-often marketed abroad -- for the realities of Chilean consumer culture offer no new information or exotic value in the global market. The most compelling images of Chile sold on the international market are those of a pastoral nation of poets, like Pablo Neruda, and musicians, like Violeta Parra, which enable visions of a multicultural and diverse land. What I find most suggestive of this trend are the ideological contradictions afforded by mass-marketing icons associated with popular struggle. If Chile today reads like Dorfman's Chilex, is it possible that the stories of rebels, even if neatly packaged in Disneyesque trappings, will keep the nation and the international community from forgetting Chile's history?

Given that the Chilean culture industries depict some of the most extreme features of hypercapitalist society -- mass materialism, economic inequality, individualistic ideology, commodification of social and political desire, etc. -- how does the commodification of Chile in the global market mirror national developments? Moreover, how does the tension between global and local representations of Chile suggest the possibility for subversive readings? One of the effects of transnational capitalism is a heightened desire for that which is perceived as being authentic. By authentic, I am referring to a desire for "local color", or, the socially specific. This phenomenon (the desire for the local within the context of the global, or, the desire for the authentic in the context of hyper-fabrication of meaning) affects most deeply satellite markets outside of the United States' mainstream.

Whether we speak of marginal culture within or outside of the United States, cultural value appears to follow a similar trajectory. The economy of transnational media culture requires that the local attain value, first in the "World" economy and later in the form of heightened local appreciation.7 As Jorge Edwards states in relation to Chilean influence on Chilean readers: ". . . creo que el cuerpo cultural chileno es incapaz de consagrar, incapaz de convencer al público de que conviene, de que interesa leer determinadas cosas. Sólo la consagración desde fuera convence" (55). [I believe that the Chilean cultural corpus is incapable of consecrating, incapable of convincing the public that it is worthwhile to read certain things. Consecration only comes from outside.] While Edwards suggests that this trend changes in 1992 with the New Chilean Narrative, his assertion that cultural value at the local level follows foreign "consecration" is suggestive of the extraordinary role the global plays within the local. In this way, the economics of localized culture turns on the reappropriation of texts, which, after international reification, masquerade as autochthonous cultural artifacts.

For a country like Chile, then, culture is only meaningful after it attains exchange-value in a global market. This process is evidenced, for example, by the enormous international success of the Italian film, *Il Postino*, based on the poet Pablo Neruda and the expanding market for World Music, some of which draws on the Chilean *Nueva Canción* Movement from the 60s. Not only are these two examples of the transnational economics of media, they are also indicative of the reinsertion of the local after a commodity transformation in a global sense. Moreover, these two cases underscore the embedded dialectics of transnational media culture that uses artists associated with social change and leftist politics to sell history, hope and social meaning.

To explore the political possibilities of both hope and despair in this new era of Chilean culture my analysis focuses on the role played by Violeta Parra (one of Chile's most famous musicians) and Pablo Neruda (Chile's Nobel Prize-winning poet) in the export and re-import of Chilean culture. As Dorfman writes, "everything is exportable," and so it seems to be. Everything is for sale, even Chilean artists who worked for social change, who spent their lives building ties to the Chilean people and who consistently refused the modernist impulse to be reified under the aura of the artist. The question that must be addressed, though, is whether the product exported reaffirms capitalist ideology, challenges it, or does both.

Se vende la guitarra de Violeta Parra / Violeta Parra's Guitar For Sale

Violeta Parra

Violeta Parra, the renowned musician of the Chilean people, is a prime example of the export of Chile's political culture to the transnational marketplace. If, under hypercapitalism, everything is commodified and is valued precisely according to its function within the market, how can we understand the cultural production of those that position themselves against capitalist materialism? Violeta Parra's music typifies the case of political music, which is positioned outside the realm of high art, and which has been appropriated by the music industry in the neatly packaged form of World Music. The category of World Music is a recent addition to the market and it refers not to international music, but to a special music which reflects a global sound by including a combination of uniquely local instruments and rhythms.8 What is most noteworthy is that World Music celebrates the local without attention to history or specificity.

The music of Violeta Parra was born out of the struggle for political change. Today, thirty years after her death, Parra's work is not symbolic of political struggle but rather of the alienating effects of capitalist marketability. Her music accompanied Chileans who voted Socialist Salvador Allende to the presidency in 1970 only to suffer over two decades of censorship or clandestine admiration during the neo-liberal economic dynasty of Pinochet. Since the return to democracy her daughter has established the Violeta Parra Foundation, sales of her music have risen (thanks to re-released or "homage" albums available as compact discs), her poetry has been published and cultural appreciation of her has gained an official space on Chilean terrain. Public reception of her work represents and reflects the political and economic changes that have occurred in Chile since her death.

In its initial cultural context, Violeta Parra's work had a tremendous social impact as a voice for solidarity and rebellion during the period preceding and directly after the bloody coup of Pinochet in 1973. Her music combined the beauty and scope of Chilean indigenous culture with an interest in changing the social status of the disenfranchised. This type of music has come to be known as the "Nueva Canción Chilena" -- a popular-based music inspired by the traditional music of the Andes. The 1960s in Chile, as in much of the world, were a period of deeply divisive politics separated by socialist or Marxist politics and North American-style capitalism. Cultural production in Chile reflected the political struggle of people like Violeta Parra involved in the *Nueva Canción* movement. As was the case with other musical movements of the 60s, this music had a

strong political message at the same time that it was extremely popular. In this musical movement "[t]he song is perceived as a social compromise focused on the problems and concerns of the marginal and dispossesed" (Dolz-Blackburn 148).

Despite Parra's increasing popularity and financial success, she refused to succumb to the lure of materialism and she lived her final years in a tent in a remote suburb of Santiago. The tent project was ambitious: Violeta would live, create, hold workshops, and perform all within a large tent. She told her daughter Isabel that her decision to live in the tent was based on an absolute rejection of the conventional and a desire to reunite herself with the earth (Parra 142). She continued to dress as a peasant, her home had a dirt floor, and she rejected any sign of bourgeois decorations: Parra was extremely suspicious of anyone who seemed interested in Chilean folklore for personal gain (Morales 142).

Despite her personal commitment to the project, the tent Violeta constructed as a center for Popular Art, a place to hear forgotten songs and understand the culture of the remote regions of Chile, failed. While intellectuals today exalt her artistry and social commitment, when she was alive, few supported her. A reporter who visited her tent in 1966 noted that, despite the marvels of her project, the Santiago intellectual community had treated her work with indifference (Parra 141). Parra enjoyed a strange relationship with her Chilean audience: After winning an award for best folkloric musician she went to Paris to record her first album and later returned to exhibit her paintings at the Louvre. Her success in Paris aided her notoriety in Chile but her reception in Chile remained uneven. Ricardo García recounts that in 1954, while he was preparing a radio show of folkloric music in collaboration with Violeta, she began to play her guitar. The reaction of those at the radio station was extremely mixed: "Some laughed, others said: 'How is it possible that they are going to let someone sing who doesn't even know how to project her voice?'" (Parra 40). On another occasion Violeta was asked to perform in honor of the internationally known Chilean singer, "La Negra Linda," who asked during Violeta's performance if the songs were meant to be funny or serious. (Parra 47). This mixed reception of Parra as a significant artist changed after her suicide in 1967, as mass appeal and intellectual interest moved beyond her creative projects and instead emphasized her as an eccentric *artist*. Her tragic death and the assassination of musician Victor Jara, by Pinochet's military, resulted in a reification of the *Nueva Canción* movement. Parra and Jara were immortalized through their music as voices for the Chilean nation. Nevertheless, their treatment as icons meant that their role as social actors was ignored.[9] As Inés Dolz-Blackburn notes in a detailed survey of Parra's popular image: "For the masses, her figure has become a cult object, a myth equivalent to the one exercised by Eva Perón in Argentina" (146).

To best understand how historical context can be overshadowed by the interests of the market it is important to consider the way in which Parra's work moved from the space of the "people" to high culture and commercial success. After her death, Parra's music was performed internationally by different bands and she was canonized as a poet in Chile. Today, poetry anthologies include her work as a way to balance the scales of a male-dominated genre in Chile. Nevertheless, Inés Dolz-Blackburn points out that her work as a poet did not receive scholarly attention of any significance until the 80s and 90s.

Intellectuals ". . . have integrated her into the literary canon as a writer of utmost importance" (150).

Parra's relationship to her various audiences explains the slippery meaning of "popular". Is popular of the people? Is popular marketable? Douglas Kellner has argued that the term "popular culture" is misleading because it wavers between these two notions (33-35). In the case of Parra the role of the "popular" is transmogrified from meaning "of the people" to "commercially successful". Violeta stated: "Yo creo que todo artista debe aspirar a tener como meta el fundirse, el fundir su trabajo en el contacto directo al público. [I believe that all artists should aspire to the goal of fusion, fusing their work with direct contact with the public.] (Parra 140*).* The assertion that popular art is art created in contact with the people and as a means of empowering the voiceless is quite different from a description of popular art as art consumed in mass quantities. Just as will be shown later with the poet Pablo Neruda, Violeta remains "popular": it is the notion of the people and the popular which alters in terms of signifying the social function of her work.

As testimony to her transition to high-cultural icon, Parra's work has been the subject of scholarly research and she was recently the subject of a conference in Chile held to commemorate the new edition of her poetic works. The series of lectures from 1996 emphasizes the scholarly interest in negotiating Parra's work as "an expression of artistic value with sufficient merit to be intellectually accepted, despite its 'low' themes and language and in spite of the rhythms and tones of her music" (Neves). The complexities of inserting Parra into literary critique expose the tensions that persist between Parra as popular icon and Parra as an artist of feminist and social commitment. Each of the lectures from the "Homage to Violeta Parra" waver between identifying her as an elusive myth of female creativity and an artist committed to social issues. She has been described as a popular poet as well as a significant feminist poet, although her music and poetry deal with gender issues in a traditional romantic fashion.

Her role as poet is only in part an effect of feminist movements in Chile. Her literary canonization is also a result of her conversion from social outcast into intellectual interest. What seems most noteworthy is that Violeta herself had no interest in becoming Chile's next Gabriela Mistral. Her poetry was yet another form of expression, an expression which rested on a connection to Chile. In her song "Gracias a la vida" she states that the unified song of the people, which is also her song, creates her music. Such articulations emphasize how her work as a poet was not a solitary effort but constituted a form of communication with a collective. There is no question that her writing forms a significant part of her work. What is disturbing is how a life that defied categories and social hierarchy was later appropriated by society and created into a commodity. Inés Dolz-Blackburn explains: "Unfortunately, the political 'vampirism' or the use of the Violeta phenomenon by many self-serving persons or entities in order to reach personal goals still persists" (149).

Violeta has not only become a member of the literary canon; she has also become the (posthumous) songwriter for musicians and a source of their success. Therefore, in

addition to losing her guitar and being dubbed a "poet" (where the collective nature of her work dissolves into an individualistic "high brow" art), Parra's music helped musicians achieve international fame. The failure of the Socialist Revolution and the resulting state of exile caused some *Nueva Canción* musicians to gain particular attraction among an international public. In today's context, their music attracts nostalgic leftists, hispanophiles, and consumers of world music whose material desire highlights the commercial exchange value of culture that has been "purified" of historical and political referents, but which still markets the past within a timeless present.

The reification of musicians like Parra and Jara and the commodification of the *Nueva Canción* movement can be understood as a consequence of transnational capitalism. In the interest of marketing, this music's political origins are stripped in favor of a high-tech reconstruction, which is mass marketed. The collective nature of this music, which depended on collaboration, is now transformed into the product of unique and discrete artists where the historical process enabling such work is fragmented. The de-politicization of Parra's music is not a consequence of its transformation from mass culture to high, although such a reconsideration of her work surely has the effect of separating the music from the context of its production. Rather, the reification of Parra's work must be understood as the long-term effect of cultural production that is attractive within the marketplace. Consequently, despite such culture's position against commercial materialism it ultimately becomes that which it despises. When considering the possibilities for political culture today one must account for the way in which a culture of the margins is often co-opted after the fact. In this way, political culture is a historical product that does not retain its political position regardless of historical change. Yet, it is not my position that the politics of this music can not be understood or that it is impossible to trace its historical context. On the contrary, in my opinion, it is precisely because the politics of the movement are a subtext to the music that some listeners appreciate this music's representation of social struggle from a position of nostalgic passivity. My point, then, is that political culture is historically specific and should only be appreciated as such. What's more ahistorical appreciations of culture contribute to the persistence of the social oppression at the heart of this music's protest. What we need to remember, then, is the following: Today Parra's music exemplifies a political music, which affected society in the 1960s and 70s. At the turn of the millennium, Chile is a part of global capitalism and the music, which sang out against it, is part of that success.

The case of Inti-Illimani's appropriation of Violeta Parra's music demonstrates how her music has been reified and suggests some of the ways that the music of social protest has a complex relationship to its historical context. Inti-Illimani is the band name for a group of male university students who decided to dedicate themselves to music in 1967, the year of Violeta Parra's death. Inti-Illimani was originally exiled from Chile and survived through their ability to play the compelling songs of Chilean social protest. The group has released more than thirty albums yet almost exclusively uses the lyrics of others. Nevertheless, they are often considered the founders of the political music of the *Nueva Canción* probably because they are the main group to have recorded under the specific title of the *Nueva Canción Chilena*. On that particular recording six songs are composed by Violeta Parra.

Inti-Illimani

Today Inti-Illimani is the main example of the *Nueva Canción* movement. As Jose Manuel García explains: "the political and musical panorama in Chile really changed in the approximately 15 years of exile most musicians had to endure. While Inti-Illimani adapted perfectly to the new situation other groups did not do so." The persistence of the *Nueva canción* movement is a credit to the work of Inti-Illimani. Not only have they performed for Amnesty International, they have also created a foundation under the name of Victor Jara in order to support young, Chilean musicians. The group held the most nominations at the 1998 Entertainment Journalist Association Awards Ceremony in Santiago, winning Best Group of the Year. They are often referred to as Chile's "most-loved" or "musical masters," and they are unquestionably the most internationally successful Chilean group performing today. There is no doubt, then, that the group has done much to promote this type of music. The question remains though, at what cost have they achieved so much success?

The answer may be found in critical reviews of their music. For instance, in an advertisement for one of their albums the group is described as a perfect blend of folklore and cutting edge music: "Notwithstanding their attachment and respect towards the popular tradition, their music is a perfect contemporary product, in which folklore is only the starting point for the development of their own language, that turns out to be far away from an 'archeological' or 'museum-type' popular music." Politics, like folklore, seem to be only a starting point and one which is easily glossed. *Dirty Linen Magazine*, describing one of their performances, writes: "Inti-Illimani spun a mesmerizing blend of South American, European, and other geographically diverse influences, walking a line between political folk music, endemic instrumental traditions, and classical instrumentation and arrangements." The "fine line" achieved by such postmodern eclecticism aimed at mass-marketing can only lead to a displacement of the political in favor of the spectacular.

Even by their own admission, their music no longer maintains the politics originally at the center of the *Nueva Canción* movement. After returning to Chile for the 1988 plebiscite, they found that the music of social protest was dead. Subsequently, they expanded their musical sources to include the previously ignored bolero -- they originally considered it too trivial -- as well as a heightened influence of European classical music (an elitist influence which competes with a notion of political music of the people) (Cifuentes). By going global they have lost the local. The promise of politics, packaged as a nostalgic yearning for social protest, is a marketing ploy for the group and

demonstrates how transnational economics turns political protest into a commodity. Jorge Coulon, a band member, states: "We have a concept of society . . . and we try to translate our ideas into sound, not to be a part of one political party or another but in the sense to bring about a better world" (Inti-Illimani). This statement emphasizes the murky politics of "a better world" that paradoxically supports, through lack of focus, capitalist hegemony. Due, in part, to the fame and fortune of Inti-Illimani, transnational media culture has colonized Violeta Parra's music: her songs are a part of global capital and her struggle is no longer fought, but sold.

Neo-liberalizing Neruda: The Postalities of Pop-poetry

> I have always wanted the hands of the people to be seen in poetry. I have always preferred a poetry where the fingerprints show. A poetry of loam, where water can sing. A poetry of bread, where everyone may eat.
>
> --Pablo Neruda

The tone and tenor of Neruda's message in the above quote undergoes a substantial ideological, material, and commercial transformation in the 1996 cinematic depiction of the "poet of the people," *Il Postino*. Translated as *The Postman*, this Italian film was an adaptation of the novella by Chilean Antonio Skármeta, *Ardiente paciencia* (*Burning Patience*). Skármeta published the text, while in exile in 1985, after the release of his homonymous film. Study of Neruda's work, social impact, and connection to Chilean culture is clearly a broad enterprise, but examining the representation of Neruda in *Il Postino* offers a singular perspective on the way in which a figure associated with social struggle has become a "material" witness (or unwilling accomplice) to the post-political ideology of Chile's neo-liberal economy. Or, to refer back to Neruda's words, the story of *Il Postino* reveals the fingerprints of "the people" who in working with the aura of Neruda found a way to construct a marketable image where not "everyone may eat" but a few may eat a lot.

Neruda watching "Il Postino"

The film of Neruda and his friendship with a postman was, in its original versions, a uniquely Chilean tale. The context of Chile before the coup, narrated in exile after the coup, provided the intended audience of Chileans living under the dictatorship of Pinochet a vision of the connection between history, art, and personal relationships. In the

re-make, almost all local referents to Chile *disappear*. This absence of the local becomes even more interesting when one notes that the film was far more successful in Chile than *Death and the Maiden*, the adaptation of Ariel Dorfman's play, starring Sigourney Weaver and Ben Kingsley, and directed by Roman Polanski. The difference is that Dorfman's work focuses on the period of reconciliation following dictatorship with a purposely vague setting (probably in Chile but possibly elsewhere). Many critics, including the author himself, have noted that the poor Chilean reception of *Death and the Maiden* is a result of the desire for historical amnesia, which the film refuses to permit.[10] In contrast, *Il Postino* allows a lapse of historical memory, which has been so pervasive that, while commemorating the twenty-five years since Neruda's death, the film was often invoked in order to remind young people of the poet's identity. In fact, the poet is scarcely known by Chilean youth, who suffer from the legacy of a dictatorship that censored his work. In this sense, the role of *Il Postino* in constructing a media image of Chilean culture in Chile is indisputable.

Il Postino was a tremendous marketing success on a global scale thanks in large part to the efforts of Miramax's distribution machine and corresponding merchandising -- the marketing of the film is no surprise when we recall that Miramax is a subsidiary of Disney. In order to "sell" the film as an Oscar winner, it was re-released in early 1996. The *Detroit New*s on January 5, 1996 reported that "Harvey Weinstein, Miramax's co-chairman, calls today's reopening 'the biggest release in the history of foreign-language films' and says *Il Postino* is being supported by a substantial print and TV advertising campaign." The marketing blitz landed the film a nomination for Best Picture, plus four more categories, for the 1995 Oscar competition, thus sending Miramax's management into rapture. "This is a miracle, an absolute bloody miracle," Harvey Weinstein, co-chairman of Miramax Films (Corliss). As reported in *Time Magazine*: "The company didn't use burger-chain tie-ins or Massimo Troisi dolls to merchandise the picture, but it did sell 30,000 copies of the 1985 Antonio Skarmeta novel on which the film is based, and another 25,000 books of Neruda poetry" (Ibid.). Translations of the novel were re-released under the title of *The Postman*, and a new glossy covered Spanish edition featuring the protagonist from the film on the cover appeared with the title *El cartero de Neruda* [*Neruda's Postman*], and the original title in parentheses and small type below. A compact disc of popular icons like Sting, Madonna, Julia Roberts, Glenn Close and Wesley Snipes reading Neruda was produced. Yet the original film, which had won awards at film festivals after its release, was noticeably absent from the marketing-hype.[11]

While the title of the novel changed its content remained the same, save for its message to the Chilean public, which was omitted in the re-release. Comparing the two texts, the 1985 and the re-print of 1995, yields interesting clues as to the transformation of the postman's tale. The novel, as mentioned, remains identical, including the frame, which is the story of a writer who had promised the postman's widow to tell his story and that of his friendship with Neruda. It is noteworthy, then, that the "message" to the reader (who is implied as Chilean) is absent from the reprint. Moreover, it is in the message that the author informs us of his personal opinion of Neruda, and he suggests that within the figure of the poet exist many versions of Neruda. Each Chilean, he proposes, has a

particular image of him, from the romantic of love poetry to the politically-committed writer of *Canto General*. Most importantly, Skármeta reveals that the Neruda of *Ardiente paciencia* is one of the many possible Nerudas, and that the vision of the poet provided through the eyes of his postman should not "impose itself or compete with the other Nerudas that each reader rightly harbors." Skármeta only asks that "together with each person's Neruda, this version be given a democratic place from which to share the time of this brief fiction."

The omission of this plea from the writer to see the fictional representation, not as a replacement for the poet himself, but merely as a narrative possibility that may enhance one's understanding of Neruda, exposes the shift in representational politics from the original film to the remake, as well as the shift in context from the first edition of the text to the 1995 reprint. The remade Neruda of post-plebiscite Chile, post-modern culture, post-national cinema, and post-political ideology is still the "poet of the people." It is the notion of "people" which has changed. In the 1985 text and film a writer of the people is someone who is politically committed and works in solidarity with those denied access to official lines of discourse. This articulation of a people's poet has been erased in 1995 in favor of the vision of a poet who, through popular love poetry, symbolizes the people's desire for sex and romance. Moreover, Neruda, the person, has been morphed in the Italian film from social agent to celebrity. Nathan Wolfson explains that the film asks the viewer to "Pay attention to 'Neruda, the poet of love' -- and to his romantic aura" and consequently undermines ". . . the aspirations of all people (such as Neruda) who spend their lives working for justice."

Another blatant distinction between the Italian film and its original text is the change in location and historic period. Instead of taking place in Chile in the years preceding, during and directly after Allende's presidency, the film is set on a small Italian island twenty years earlier when Neruda was briefly exiled from Chile and was welcomed in Italy. While some might suggest that it made sense to shift the setting, since the film was an Italian production, such an argument is obviously weakened by the fact that filmmakers have never considered it necessary that native language and locale match. Moreover, the film exemplifies the type of transnational collaboration common today, with an English director, an Italian and French cast, and a screenplay based on a Chilean novella. In this case the transnational obfuscates the local: the film loses ties to territorial specificity but gains the gloss of the global.

Consequently the decision to remove the film from a Chilean setting to neutral, Italian territory functions as an erasure of history, made all the more extreme by the altered periodization of the film. That the film takes place, not as Neruda is being asked to run for president in Chile in the late 1960s, but instead as he is fleeing political persecution in his homeland (Neruda left Chile after a call for his arrest in February of 1949 and returned in August, 1952) can hardly be read as a "neutral" decision. The depiction of Neruda as an exile, unwanted in his native land, suggests the notion that Neruda is a "landless" poet -- a concept that ratifies the depiction of Neruda as "poet of the people" whose global identity is absent of local ties. In fact, Neruda's local friendship appears to represent a mere convenience (or inevitable nuisance) in the face of Mario's, the

postman's, persistence. Moreover, when the film refers to Neruda's ties to Chile it waxes nostalgic and sentimental. Yet later when Neruda is able to return home in the film, much emphasis is placed on Mario's disillusionment over how his friend seems to have completely abandoned him. Mario's nostalgia, like that of Neruda, suggests male weakness and political suicide, for as we know, Mario is killed at a demonstration where he was to read a poem in honor of Neruda.

In contrast, the novella narrates Neruda's love for Chile as a passion stemming from both political commitment and sentimental attachment. When he leaves Mario and Chile to be ambassador to Chile in Paris after Allende's election, he writes Mario his first letter (in the film Neruda's secretary writes to Mario asking him to forward Neruda's belongings). The letter is everything Mario had ever expected, and it also includes a tape recorder that Neruda sends with the request that Mario record the sounds of their village so that Neruda can listen to them in Paris and treat his homesickness. The emotional attachment between the two men in the novel is a metaphor for solidarity and camaraderie.

As opposed to the text version, in the film, before Mario complies with the secretary's request, he uses Neruda's recorder to make him a tape. Yet the unsolicited recordings of the sounds of the Italian island never reach Neruda because, after Mario's death, his wife keeps the tape. Neruda only hears the tape as the film closes and he is forced to recognize the pain that he caused his "postman." In this way the film reverses the camaraderie between Neruda and Mario depicted in the novella. In fact the film suggests that Mario was foolish to care for the poet, since the poet is actually single-minded and selfish, incapable of solidarity, and no different from the deceptive politician who controls the Italian island for his own personal gain. In short, Neruda is presented as an example of a truly global capitalist. In this way the film neo-liberalizes Neruda and reduces his life's works to pop poetry and postmodern play.

The different sign-posts found in the 1985 novella and the 1995 film function as clues to the substantive changes that have taken place in Chile and around the globe. As Nathan Wolfson explains: "This attitude of post-modern indifference to matters of politics and economics is a frightfully pervasive, implicit, rightist theme underlying many interludes in the film." The naïve politics of the postman in the novella find meaning and materiality, whereas the film shows how the postman's politics never go beyond naiveté and one-sided blind loyalty to a friend. Commitment in the novel is transformed in the film to suggest the meaninglessness of political compromise. Where Mario in the novel gains a friend, a love of poetry, a family, and a sense of politics, in the film he aspires to all of these but is shown as irremediably incapable of any true social act.

In this way the transfiguration of Neruda and his friendship symbolizes the shift in ideology from the leftist-oriented work of Skármeta in exile to the post-political neo-liberal landscape of Chile in 1995 where writers like Skármeta have substantially altered their commitment to politics, either through a loss of faith or a sense of futility. This change is also evidenced by the erasure of the original title of the novella, *Ardiente paciencia*, to *Il Postino* for the film and *El cartero de Neruda* for the re-release of the

novella. When asked about the title, Skármeta stated that he agreed with the change. In fact he mentions that the title change was a good idea because the original title was too abstruse: "Burning patience is a beautiful concept (it comes from Rimbaud and Neruda) but it is a very confusing title."12 Skármeta's mention of "confusion" alludes to far more than the contradiction in terms of burning with patience. I would venture that at some level Skármeta is hinting at the inability of contemporary mass culture to appreciate the title's reference. In fact in 1988 Skármeta in "Europe: An Indispensable Link" discusses his theory of the relationship between Latin American cinema and the international film industry, particularly Europe. In response to the question of how Europe can enable Latin American filmmakers he remarks: "Do not propose utopian or superhuman tasks, do not be so foolish or suicidal as to want to impose on a greater number of viewers a work of art the keys to which are usually unclear and which tends to leave the impression of being exotic"(268-69). As with the change in his title, Skármeta suggests that a film entitled *Ardiente paciencia* will appeal to fewer viewers than *Il Postino*. Moreover he states that ". . . the cinema of Latin America almost always occupies a political position and one with a marginal scope" (268). The change from his original film to the Miramax "blockbuster" required, then, a de-politicization and narrative simplification, clearly marked by the title change.

The original title's reference is noteworthy, though, and explains, in part, another motive for its transformation -- that of historicity. It originates from Neruda's acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971, where he was awarded the prize "for a poetry that with the action of an elemental force brings alive a continent's destiny and dreams." In terms of the narrative, Neruda mid-way through the text gave this speech as he was awarded the prize and his friend, Mario, celebrated in their village. Yet in the Italian film, Neruda merely aspires to the prize anxiously awaiting telegrams from the Nobel Committee some twenty years before actually winning it. The difference in terms of the poet's stature and social significance pre-Nobel is vast. In the 50s Neruda had yet to write or publish many of the works that led to the award.

Moreover, the erasure of the reference, by way of changing the title, has further ideological impact. Neruda associates himself with France's *enfant terrible*, Rimbaud, and paraphrases the poet. As he concludes his acceptance speech he states: "[t]o all men of good will, to workers, to poets, the entire future was expressed in this phrase from Rimbaud: only with a burning patience will we conquer the city which will give light, justice, and dignity to all men. In this way poetry won't have sung in vain."13 By ignoring this aspect of Neruda's life, the film overemphasizes Neruda as a sensual and romantic man interested in his own pleasure. The man who connected poets with workers and believed that poetry was a political act is absent from the 1995 film. His replacement is frivolous and lacks the sense of solidarity that characterizes Neruda's dream of a place where all can find dignity -- with the help of poetry. In this sense, the film represents a neo-liberal Neruda whose poetry has gone from political to pop through mass marketing and the replacement of social commitment with artistic aura.

Obstinate History

The ways in which Parra and Neruda represent the effects of transnational capitalism and international consumption of Chilean culture seem to indicate a hopeless and ubiquitous capitalist condition. Yet with all signs of overt capitalism come subversive possibilities, not the least of which are those afforded by the mass marketing of leftists. The presence of Neruda and Parra in the cultural commodification of Chile ensures, at one level, the persistence of their ideas, and enables the possibility that their work will reveal the imbedded dialectics of Chilean history.

The arrest of Pinochet in October of 1998 in England and the decision to overrule diplomatic immunity -- opening the door for extradition to Spain -- by the English courts in March 1999 sent a strong message that despite post-political hypercapitalism, history remains obstinate.14 The increased political globalization of the end of the century may actually lead to progressive local change. That Pinochet may have been tried on foreign soil for human rights violations committed in Chile indicates the transnational state of politics as well as the possibility that, however unlikely, justice may be served. Just as Dorfman suggested in *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero* when the dragon Pinchot was vanquished by David, it remains the case that there are Davids who continue to seek justice for the atrocities committed under Pinochet.

In addition, the media culture of Chile contains more than pop renditions of Neruda and Parra. For instance, Patricio Guzmán returned to Chile in 1997 and screened his epic three-part documentary *La batalla de Chile* to Chileans who had never seen actual footage of the coup. The film made in Chile for a Chilean audience suffered censorship during Pinochet.15 While most of the young people he showed it to were suspicious of the film, considering it leftist propaganda, Guzmán captured reactions of students who were astonished and moved by what they saw. In the documentary about the screening of *La batalla de Chile*, *Chile: Obstinate Memory* Guzmán depicts the difficulty Chileans face with memory of the past. However painful or ideologically tainted the process may be, the film alludes to the fact that despite political apathy Chile is the home of many people who are committed to social justice.

History remains obstinate. It refuses to be forgotten despite media blitzes and marketing hype meant to dazzle and deviate. As in Jameson's *political unconscious* Chilean culture continues to show the fingerprints of history. Yet, in his more recent work, Jameson argues that in postmodernism's *Cultural Turn* one observes ". . . the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change . . ." (20). He leaves the question open of whether postmodern culture has subversive potential. Nevertheless, as this study has shown, the past may not be retained but in the case of Parra and Neruda it can be transformed, changed, and perpetuated through media culture. The subversive potential of such transformations may be fragile but, through persistence, history demands to be remembered.

Taca-taca Pinochet

Memory and remembering history have been made even more acute for Chileans since the arrest of Pinochet, the master of historical amnesia. Perhaps the best way to imagine Chile's future is to consider two cultural responses to Pinochet's arrest. On the one hand, a Chilean vineyard in conjunction with "The Friends of the Nation" has released a Cabernet Sauvignon to show support and raise funds for the arrested ex-General. The wine sells with the label "Capitán General" and is presented in a black box with a certificate declaring that the owner of the wine has been shown to provide the ethical and moral conditions necessary to drink and enjoy the wine.16 On the other hand, continuing to use Pinochet's arrest as a source of entertainment, though one far from that provided by sipping wine and admiring a certificate, one finds the new variation on foose-ball "Taca-taca Pinochet." Developed by the Brazilian director of a summer camp, Luis Gonzaga Rocha Leite, the game uses targets with small images of the arrested ex-general. According to the designer the game has a double function: it teaches kids to "hit dictators and to fight for human rights." That these two items are part of commercial culture in Chile suggests that there continue to be battles over which version of history to remember and promote. Moreover, the existence of these products indicates that the Chilex created by transnational media culture is not entirely commensurate with the Chile that still suffers from the history of dictatorship.

Capitán General

Notes

Editors' note: This essay first appeared in *Mediations*, Vol. 22, Spring 1999. It is reprinted here by permission of the editors.

1 Translation in text mine. Original version in a letter dated March 5, 1999: "A mi juicio, para la intelectualidad chilena la desaparición de la Epoca es gravísima. Quedamos en poder de un oligopolio informativo controlado en su mayor parte por sectores de ultraderecha. Y esto dificulta y coarta la tarea de un escritor que además quisiera escribir en una prensa independiente y a la vez progresista."

2 During the week of March 8, 1999 the Santiago *Cinemark*, a multi-national theater chain with 12 screens, was showing only one film in Spanish and nine out of twelve films were Hollywood productions.

3 For more on the debate over Raúl Ruiz and his relationship to Chilean cinema see: *La Mirada*. Online version on Ruiz at: <http://www.imago.cl/mirada/ruiz.htm>. It is also noteworthy that Duke University has an excellent archive of his work, while his films remain elusive in Chile.

4 She explains that there are currently seven feature films in production for release in 1999, but she remains doubtful about their ability to reach a large sector of the Chilean public.

5 For their official statement on their business objectives visit their home page at: <http://www.camlibro.cl/planeta.htm>.

6 The home page for the publisher mentions that: "A comienzos de los '90, esta editorial empieza a tener su propia producción local, dando cabida a autores chilenos nuevos y consagrados en las categorías de ficción y no ficción, transformándose al poco tiempo en una de las empresas editoriales multinacionales con mayor presencia de sus ediciones locales en el mercado." <http://www.camlibro.cl/grijalbo.htm>

7 A variation of this notion, but one which still functions to support my claim is the case of the New Chilean Narrative. These authors have become bestsellers in their local market and are receiving greater international recognition now. Yet, their market success locally must first be understood as the direct result of their publishers' multi-national presence and sufficient capital to promote and produce their texts in the Chilean market.

8 An example of World music ideology can be found in an advertisement for Inti-Illimani's *Arriesgaré la piel*: "*Very* different, European café sophistication, Latin American passion, with currents of Tango and gypsy. Vibrant instrumentation including sax, flute, piccolo, clarinet, fiddle, mandolin, and cuatro, sumptuous harmonies, layered Latin hand percussion. Moods from gay and lively to haunting and meditative." (From Music Catalog: The Andes. Internet. April 14, 1999. Available at: <http://www.irresist.com/vec128.html>).

9 Demonstrating the way in which Chilean history and culture is being commodified, there have been reports in entertainment magazines and through the BBC that the story of Victor Jara's life will be made into a film written and directed by Emma Thompson who will also star as his wife.

10 There has been significant discussion of the fact that the play was a success in London and on Broadway, but closed early in Santiago. For a survey of the debate and various opinions see Javier Campos' review of the film, in the LASNET archive of January 5, 1995.

11 Film critic, Edwin Jahiel states: "I have not found a single reference to that first "Burning Patience" movie. Even the press releases keep mum on this." Available at: <http://www.prarienet.org/%7Eejahiel/postman.htm>.

12 "Ardiente paciencia es un concepto muy bonito (viene de Rimbaud y Neruda) pero un título muy confuso." Available at: <http:www.clarin.com.ar/diario/reportajes/feria/skarmeta.html>.

13 The original speech is available on the Nobel Prize website at: <http://www.almaz.com/nobel/literature/1971a.html>.

14 Pinochet, ultimately, returned to Chile and was not tried on foreign soil. The Chilean people continue to debate the Pinochet case and it remains unclear whether he will stand trial in Chile. For the latest on the case as well as related information check Yahoo on Pinochet at: <http://fullcoverage.yahoo.com/Full_Coverage/World/Pinochet/>.

15 The narrator speaking in a heavy Castilian accent, a foreign sound to Chilean Spanish, underscores this local absence.

16 The certificate also states that the wine was produced in order to acknowledge the modernizing work of the greatest military figure of the twentieth century and the Second Liberator of the Nation, Captain General Don Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. Available at: <http://www.tercera.cl/casos/pinochet2/curiosidades.html>.

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