

What's an Ecologically Sensitive Poetics? Song, Breath and Ecology in Southern Chile

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In this article I wish to sketch an idea of what we could term an 'ecologically sensitive' poetry, where 'ecological sensitivity' itself refers to practices that involve, but do not exploit or weaken, the surrounding ecosystem. I'll be referring in particular to some of the work of an important Indigenous Chilean poet, Leonel Lienlaf (b. 1969), but at times the argument will also be broadened. Where possible, I propose some links between Indigenous Chilean (Mapuche) and Aboriginal Australian poetics. While doing so is in some sense arbitrary—Mapuche and Aboriginal peoples are differentiated linguistically, culturally and geographically—in another sense it is entirely relevant—after all, both contemporary Mapuche and Aboriginal poetics draw on rich, and still very contemporary, traditions of oral poetics. Furthermore, Mapuche and Aboriginal poets find both great solace and strength in these oral traditions in the face of colonisation, exploitation and territorial dispossession.¹ The Mapuches are, literally, people of the earth (*Mapu* = earth; *-che* = people [of]) and their common language, Mapuzugun is, in turn, the language of the earth (*Mapu* = earth; *-zugun* = language [of]). What an insight into Mapuche poetry provides us with, therefore, is a wholly eco-sensitive poetics, in which thought and language are as integral to the health of an ecosystem as the other organic and inorganic structures within it.

As much as Indigenous Australian and Chilean peoples might be defined by their colonial histories, Aboriginal and Mapuche people have consistently evaded the impositions of settlers in order to resist their incursions and definitions. Developing a sophisticated and diverse set of cultural and socio-economic practices, the Mapuche people resisted hundreds of years of Incan, Spanish then Chilean attempts at colonisation. They remained independent from the Spanish Empire for more than 260 years, the most successful resistance against European colonisation in history (Bengoa 281). Key to their effectiveness as warriors and their endurance and development as a culture was their ability to adapt rapidly to new and surprising conditions. For example, escaping from Spanish expansion, many Mapuche began to take refuge in the Andes. With time they began to move out into the pampas on the other side of the sierra, where their territories expanded to encompass vast hunting grounds and grazing lands. So effective were the Mapuche at resisting Spanish domination on the one hand, and at utilising the pampas on the other, that during the eighteenth and for the first part of the nineteenth centuries they occupied what was perhaps the largest territory ever controlled by an indigenous group in all of America (Bengoa 308).

As for understanding modern Aboriginal and Mapuche histories, these notions of flexibility and adaptability are also fundamental to an understanding of traditional Mapuche culture

and poetics. 'It is necessary', writes Virginia Vidal, 'to remember that the Mapuche people have always cultivated a mastery of the word':

[The Mapuche people were] the only [indigenous peoples] on the American continent who never had princes nor nobles, who only elected a leader—a *toque*—when they were in danger. The election was a competition between candidates, each of whom had to display indispensable requirements: to speak eloquently, profoundly and beautifully, interpreting the mood of the populous; to be strong, audacious and valiant, to be masters of the art of war . . . (161).

Vidal's comment highlights the fluid, adaptive nature of traditional Mapuche society. Mapuche social structures could change radically depending on external influences; an event as significant as armed conflict could cause dramatic phase changes to take place. The Spanish noted that, in times of peace, these groups would live in relative autonomy and independence, while during war they would unite under the authority of a single chief (Bengoa 283). The *toqui* were elected in times of conflict to resolve disputes and determine punishments or, in the case of war, forms of retaliation. Importantly, however, once the conflict was resolved the *toqui* was relieved of his position, and resumed a life in the society similar to that of any other Mapuche (Bengoa 278). This fluidity proved one of the Mapuches' greatest assets during the protracted wars with the conquistadors: 'the Mapuche's non-centralised political structure, which, for this reason, did not obligate its members to conform [to a single decree], constituted the principle obstacle for the invaders' (Bengoa 282).

Unlike the Incans, who had a centralised system of government and administration, the Mapuche social structure was far less hierarchical. There was no central body or figurehead. The 'society' as a whole was composed of distinct clans that, on occasion, needed to unite temporarily. The salient point here is that fluidity and adaptability have proven useful for the Mapuche people across many generations.

Before we begin to discuss Leonel Lienlaf's poetry in any detail, it is necessary to explore further this special 'mastery of the word' in Mapuche culture. If there is a particular cultural trait that distinguishes the Mapuche people, it is the fundamental role of language in their social fabric. For the Mapuches, speaking is not only a medium of communication and expression, but an art form. (Caniguan 15). As such, one's ability to use Mapuzugun ('the language of the earth'), even in contemporary contexts, is highly valued and contributes greatly to one's social prestige. Oratory capacity—in Spanish, the capacity for *hablar bien* ['to speak well']—is so valued that one who possesses it is known as a *weupin* ['one who conserves the language of the earth']. Furthermore, the earth's language determines an understanding of the universe, and of the relationships between all things (Montecino 156). For Mapuche poet and critic Elicura Chihuailaf, the words of Mapuzugun express the conception of the world as it was created by his ancestors—words are, he says, the world's 'gestures [*gestualidad*]':

... people, human beings, travel through life in a world invested with gestures. These gestures express themselves before the initial murmur between the spirit and the heart is completely understood.

Little by little, with the growth of experience, meeting with the words of the others, the colours, the aromas, the textures, the impression we are given by these things and by the mysteries of our Dreams, this said murmur transforms into a language. It is this language that translates the presence of the ancestors, of each one in his or her actuality, and the creation—and all of its potential—of his or her ‘future’.

With Silence, and resulting contemplation, understanding of the language of nature will be more profound. Consequently, there will be greater capacity to synthesise thoughts and their forms with those that we use to construct the architecture of poetry, the song that is necessary in order to live with ourselves and with others (Chihuailaf 69).

For Chihuailaf, language is a product of human engagement with those myriad other-than-linguistic forces. Not only does Mapuzugun integrate and reinforce social and worldly relationships, but it necessarily reinforces the speaker’s relationship with his or her origins and ancestors, and values and beliefs, as well (Caniguan 15). Language, therefore, functions on a variety of levels and ultimately, when constituted as poetry, is necessary for the synthesis of human and world.

What this amounts to is a conception of the speech act as a composition of earthly, material forces, implicit in which are speakers of the past and present—all the actors involved in the development of language. As in Aboriginal thought, in no sense are the categories of body, world and language separate or meaningfully discrete. The act of speaking draws a thread from the past to the world of which it speaks, and from the body from which it emerges to the community *into* which it is directed. This correlates usefully with a Deleuzian understanding of language as emerging from a virtual world of indirect discourse. Here, every production of meaning is a becoming, rather than an assertion of a fixed being, because it is a confluence of a potentially infinite, dynamic array of historical forces. The context in which one speaks is an accumulated density of such forces, all of which propel the act of speech into the future. Subjective context, therefore, can only be conceived as one of movement: ‘an infinitely complex concertation of forces’ driving the moment of speaking (Mussumi, *User’s Guide* 30). The I—in Western lyrical terms, the typographical sign of an individual’s expression—is not a discrete subject, but rather a ‘linguistic marker’ indicating precisely which body is implicated within the complex. What becomes ‘direct discourse’, or a subject’s speech, is actually ‘a detached fragment of a mass’, which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a ‘collective assemblage’: ‘the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice’ (93).

The *ül*, or songpoem, is considered the primary antecedent of the contemporary Mapuche poem (Car et al 26). Prior to European colonisation, composition and recital of *ül*, along with the sacred *tayel*, constituted the entirety of Mapuche poetic practice. Coupled with the

oral rendition of short stories, or *epeu*, Mapuche literary traditions were purely oral. The *ül* are almost exclusively improvisations, created in specific moments to celebrate or recognise particular events (Carrasco, 'Poesia' 75). Usually referring to a certain emotion, or to a feeling about a certain person or thing, they are sung in order to make manifest these emotions (Montecino 158-9). While the content of the songs themselves is improvised, the *ül* do exhibit structural similarities, or particular forms that are re-actualised at each occasion. Generally, a classical grammar is merged with more personal metaphors. For this reason, writes Hugo Carrasco, each *ül* constitutes something of a communal inheritance, and although the best *ülkantufe* ['songpoet'] might boast about his expressive abilities, he would hardly think that his songs are his own exclusive property. On the contrary, the *ülkantufe* sees the performance of an *ül* as the re-actualisation of a tradition, the integrity of which is to be guarded with the upmost loyalty (like many Aboriginal songpoems). The task of the *ülkantufe*, then, is to grant the songpoem the best qualities of his voice. The *ülkantun* ['singing/performance of the *ül*'] powerfully reconfirms the social cohesion of the community: the song becomes an axis around which the party, meeting or manifestation achieves solidarity and meaning (Carrasco, 'Poesia' 78). Generally termed *oralidad absoluta* ['absolute orality'], this oral poetic practice still has much contemporary significance as a form of intra-cultural discourse that maintains the strength and vitality of Mapuche communities (Carrasco and Contreras 26).

Like the *ül*, Leonel Lienlaf's poems have an axial quality designed to gather and re-invigorate Mapuche communities. In this way he pursues a project similar to his contemporary, Chihuailaf, for whom poetry can re-vitalise, reconstruct or even give birth to a mode of being that is genuinely Mapuche. 'We were born Mapuche', writes Chihuailaf, 'we will die Mapuche and writing [. . .] is one of the greatest ways to dignify, to guard and to recuperate [. . .] the soul of our people' (qtd. in Carrasco, *Metalingua* 71). For Chihuailaf as for Lienlaf, poetry not only guards the elements of his people's culture, but it also *generates* them (Carrasco, *Metalingua* 71). Writing is, therefore, a glorious 'bringing-forth' of the past so that the past's potential might be dispersed across the landscape to regenerate it. The cycle could be autocatalytic: by providing the poet with a language, the earth might then enjoy the benefits of renewal and reaffirmation provided by the poem.

Lienlaf's poetry allows us to *read* across a process of non-human matter becoming linguistic/poetic matter. He has said on more than one occasion that he is not a poet in the sense that a *winka* (a non-Indigenous Chilean) would define the term. 'More than a representative of my culture', he says, 'I come from it. I am an expression of it' (Chávez A12). Lienlaf is not, in other words, a lone voice, but rather a becoming of an ancestral 'assemblage'. This willingness to describe himself as a function, rather than as a source, of Mapuche culture is related to his complex conception of the word. In Mapuche 'cosmovision' each element of the universe has a particular correspondence with a variety of other elements; within this enormous fabric the human being is nothing more than a point of intensity—'a point of great dialogue'—of energies which travel 'from the trees to the clouds, to the rain and to the fire of the volcanoes' (Zurita 13). For Lienlaf, the word 'is not a human privilege'. In his poetry we are able to hear 'the heartbeat of things, their soul' (Lienlaf 13). What we are arriving at here is a notion of the word as an expressive energy, which, like other energies, travels through, and often without, material forms.

Lienlaf's work is central to this discussion because of his proximity to traditional Mapuche culture. Although he burst onto the Chilean literary scene at an extremely young age—his first book, *Se ha despertado el ave de mi corazón* ['The Bird of My Heart has Awoken'], was published in 1989 when he was just twenty years old, and went on to win a variety of prestigious awards—Lienlaf grew up in a rural Mapuche community, and only moved to the city to study in his late teens. His poetry consists invariably of the transcription onto the page of *ül* structures, while at the same time attempting to place these structures within a wider context of Mapuche colonisation and subjugation (Carrasco, 'Poetas' np). His position is complex, therefore, oscillating as it does between at least two [literary] worlds, and it is reflected in his mode of publication: his books are bilingual, written by the poet in both Mapuzugun and Spanish, in order to appeal to readers of the two languages, and to establish clear links between written Spanish and the oral poetics of the *ül*, to which all the poems refer. Perhaps Lienlaf's interest in traditional songpoetry is demonstrated most profoundly by the fact that, in the fourteen years between the publications of his two books of poems, he also produced a compact disc entitled *Canto y poesía mapuche* ['Mapuche Song and Poetry'] in 1998. This was a result of more than a decade of research into Mapuche oral poetry.

As I mentioned above, Lienlaf's poems are designed to gather and re-invigorate Mapuche communities. In 'Camino [Path' (Lienlaf 100-1), Lienlaf affirms that his literary project is to recover the lost expressions of his ancestors—a recovery which will, at the same time, provide life for the poet and the world:

He corrido a recoger el sueño
de mi pueblo
para que sea el aire respirable
de este mundo.

[I have run to recover the dream
of my people
so that it might be the air we can breathe
in this world.]

In particular, 'Camino' suggests that Lienlaf's project of recovery has the explicit aim of rescuing the silence of his people 'so that the spirit might be a wind / between the emptiness of words' The silence is a function of the negation of the Spanish tongue, written or spoken (Carrasco, *Tensiones* 33). By writing his poems in Mapuzugun before translating them into Spanish, then, Lienlaf is rescuing his people's silence with their own language, before encouraging their spirits to pass, like a wind, into Spanish. Each poem in Mapuzugun 'reinforces' Mapuche culture, while its Spanish translation transforms it into a broader protest against colonisation. As he writes elsewhere, Lautaro, the great Mapuche resistance fighter, has come to find Lienlaf 'in order to fight with the spirit / and the song' (Lienlaf 41).

I want to make yet more explicit a number of important links between Lienlaf's poetry and Mapuche oral songpoetry. In all of his work we find the short lines and small stanzas, which seem almost overwhelmed by the oceans of white page surrounding them. There is the prominent sense, then, that the stanzas could be repeated, like the stanzas of a song, in order for the white space to be more properly filled. In many poems, phrasal units within stanzas are often fragmented and free to be read either on their own, or to be connected to

those phrases above or below. Indeed, as a translator I could easily rearrange the orders of the lines in each of Lienlaf's stanzas without disturbing their relaxed syntax. Stephen Muecke has commented on a similar situation when translating Aboriginal songpoetry (if the lines of the poem can 'just turn around each other, a small cycle within a larger one', Muecke asks, then 'where does the meaning begin?') (Benterrak et al 56). We could even argue that the short lengths of Lienlaf's poems allow a heightened reading speed, which in turn contributes to a regular, rhythmic page-turning. On top of all of this, there is also the structure of both of his books to consider. Both *Se ha despertado el ave de mi corazón* and *Pewma dungu* are organised by four separate sections, which correspond to the four elements (earth, water, wind and fire) symbolised by the axis on the skin of the *kultrun*. A crucial instrument for song performance, the *kultrun* is a kind of shamanic drum; its use effectively implicates *Mapu* in the fabric of the song. For Lienlaf, therefore, song is a way of making explicit the presence of the earth in his speech.

The poems' clear structural and thematic relationships to the *ül* become yet more apparent in Lienlaf's second book, *Pewma dungu (Palabras soñadas)* ['Dreamt Words']. Just as the *ül* tends to recount daily events, or to recall certain memories, we find in *Pewma dungu* poems like the following, which is tellingly titled 'Ülkantun' ['the singing or performance of the *ül*']:²

<p>Trafuya pewman papay Kachill trayen ñi miaufel Trafuya anay rumen kachill Kiñe rayülechi kura.</p> <p>Anoche soñé, hermana que cerca de un estero mi voz andaba Pasé anoche no más por una piedra que florecía.</p>	<p>[Last night I dreamed, sister that my voice walked close by a stream I passed just last night by a rock that was flowering.]</p>
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Traditional *ül* share a number of important qualities: certain words are continually *repeated*; the verses are *irregular*; and the themes stem from situations in *daily life* (Caniguan 41). Although this poem is incredibly succinct, a number of these features are visible in 'Ülkantun'. The situation the poem describes is, of course, hardly extraordinary; rather, its importance, like the *ül*, stems from the fact that it is being spoken. It is common to find in the *ül* a confluence of poetic or ornamental rhetoric with a more personal or familiar way of speaking; this is the case in 'Ülkantun', too: while the rhythm is certainly measured carefully ('Last night I dreamed, / sister'), the address to the sister is also a distinctly familial message, and the colloquial 'no más' confirms it. We can see the *repetition* of 'anoche', as well as only two metrically equivalent lines of 'Anoche soñé' and 'anoche no más' (five syllables each, with stresses on the second and fifth). Furthermore, the title signals that this is the moment of the *singing* of the *ül*, which suggests that the text on the page *is* this very singing. At the same time, however, the repetition also catalyses the

song's bifurcation into a series of forms: a trace from a dream is sung, is transcribed into Mapuzugun, is translated into Spanish, is read, and so on.

The irregularity of the Spanish verse is overwhelming: in terms of meter, lines one and two are almost diametrically opposite to four and five, while lines three and six are almost syllabically equal. In turn, we encounter end-rhymes in lines two, three and six with 'hermana', 'andaba' and 'florecía'. Clearly, the line with the greatest weight is line three, and, like the effects of a tree drawing too much water from its surrounds, the lines before and after it are sparsely populated. It is not until we reach the final line of the poem that there is enough water for more syllables to flower, like the rock in the line itself. When spoken, therefore, the poem rises and falls like a wave—a wave that is not symmetrical or Euclidean, but like the waves we see coming towards us from the ocean: irregular, sucking the water into a thin film across the sandbar, rising up; the low, fat lull after the crash. Indeed, this arrangement is common throughout *Pewma dungu*: rarely do long lines follow in immediate succession; rather, in accordance with a carefully proportioned breath, they are sparsely distributed like the trees in open woodland. The following poem, 'Kürüf', is a good example:

Sobre los campos talados angustiado da vueltas el viento; sobre el polvo y las ceniza arrastrando los nidos donde soñaron las aves	[Over the cleared country anguished the wind whirls about; over the dust and the ashes the nests blown from where the birds dreamed
El viento se enloqueció entre las rocas porque a sus oídos ya no llega el canto suave de los árboles. (Lienlaf, 'Kürüf' <i>Pewma dungu</i> 44-5)	The wind went crazy between the rocks because to its ears the soft song of the trees came no longer.]

It is in relation to the physiological limits imposed by a speaker's voice during the act of singing—*ülkantun*—that these poems are crafted. Their proximity to song consequently determines their ephemeral, fleeting natures: they do not—indeed, they *cannot*—impose themselves like monuments, but must flare and quietly subside, returning their energies to the quiet potential of the virtual.

As I mentioned earlier, both of Lienlaf's books are arranged in four parts, each of which corresponds to a cardinal point on the kultrun's skin. At all moments the poet's voice is related to, and measured by, the beat of the kultrun. Consequently, the primeval elements of fire, air, water and earth, and the animals and plants which they form, are also part of the books' very fabric (Carrasco and Contreras 104). In *Se ha despertado*, it is in the third section, entitled 'Mi corazón está despierto con la tierra' ['My heart is awake with the land'], that the spirit of the songs flourishes in the poet, granting him the confidence to assume a role as an integral part of the world and, therefore, as a Mapuche (remembering

that *mapu* = earth and *che* = people) (Carrasco and Contreras 102). It is as if the beats of the ritual not only purify his voice but illuminate it and, in its illumination, his voice, like the Machi's, grants life:

Acaricié entonces mi corazón
y encendí con fuego mi camino
para vigilar el sueño del sol
y el baile de las estrellas.

[So I caressed my heart
and with fire I lit my path
to keep watch over the sun's dream
and the dance of the stars.

Mi risa es el sol del mediodía,
mis lágrimas las vertientes,
mi dormir es el descanso del amor
y mi despertar la vida de los peces.

My smile is the sun of midday,
my tears the streams,
my sleep is love resting
and my awakening the life of the fish.

Es así mi existir,
es así mi palabra
y las aguas me continúan cantando.
(Lienlaf, 'El Sueño de Mañkean'
Se ha Despertado 74-7)

My existence is like this,
my word is like this
and the waters keep singing to me.]

Sound, of course, is ephemeral, being composed of rapidly dissipating perturbations. Because his voice is not the only one ('the waters keep singing'), and because his own song is limited by the capacity of his lungs, Lienlaf's presence is only a momentary collection of intensities rather than an ever-present intrusion into an ecosystem. The poet cannot see everything from a heightened vantage point, but is going only by the small circle of firelight over his path. This is how the poem proceeds: not by piercing flashes of complete knowing, but through the accumulation of sediments left by departing waves of sound. If the book is structured according to the map of the kultrun, then the reading of the poems is the beating of the kultrun's skin.

In Lienlaf's work, the poem's conclusion is usually visible even before the reader has read the first line: the poem rarely strays longer than a single page; surrounded by white space, the last lines often teeter on a white precipice. A Lienlaf poem need not lead *to* another destination; it need not be a stage in a series of ascending stages, or a point passed en route to a more important one. His books, structured like the kultrun, are circular, but lines cross them at various angles. So we do not—*cannot*—read his poems as an endless stream, as one page following another, as lines and lines of text blocked up together on page after page after page. Rather, the poems are smaller and humbler. A self-reflexive loop between the reader and the page can be broken effectively because of the text's propensity to be *quiet*. The poems are more accommodating of the world: they do not take all the space available to them by pushing up to each page's edge; instead, their lines breathe in and out, expanding and contracting, and leaving plenty of space unspoken. Their ephemeral, sonic qualities reflect the fact that the poet speaks, but leaves yet more time to listen.

Despite his reservations about the written word, eco-phenomenologist David Abram argues that we should not be turning away from all writing, but taking it up, with all of its

suggestive potency, so that we can carefully write our language ‘back into the land’ (273). For Mapuche poets like Lienlaf, ‘the land’ is a complex system of diverse, and divergent, discourses. But with a language from country, that is to be returned to country, Lienlaf is indeed performing Abram’s task. He assigns a regenerative quality, as opposed to a reductive one, to written language. His Spanish translations *extend* from the poetics of the *ül*, exploiting the complexity of European signs in order to resonate with a greater array of cultural systems. Yet when we assert that Lienlaf’s intimacy with traditional oral poetry grants his work a particular sensitivity, this does *not* imply that the poems are somehow *closer* to the world. For the world is the totality of *all* forms—oral, written and otherwise. Rather, because of their modesty, of their small, fleeting presences, we might say the poems are more *sustainable*. They are organised and defined by the earth’s systems, but they do not plant themselves in a place and drain it of resources. Since they are defined by a fragility of the voice (its lack of range, its limited breath, its ignorance), they speak then subside; soon the poet is moving on. Lienlaf’s proximity to traditional song structures ensures that he engages in a poetics, and a politics, that is not bold or imposing, but which aims to change and evolve in order to avoid capture (or death).

Rather than attempting to surpass death entirely, however, Lienlaf *includes* the dead, and their country, within his poems. In times of such rapid, climactic change, the increasing numbers of these dead are an almost overwhelming source of grief for the poet who listens to them. Like the earth of which it is a part, sadness is indissoluble and its extent is indeterminable because it is not only individual, but it pervades all matter. In the words of Chihuailaf:

To my spirit have arrived the pained voices of my people, while in the wind the clouds dance the sacred dance, making, all of a sudden, my heart sing excitedly.

[. . .] Are they all dead? – I asked myself, rising up. [. . .]

I am alive, I said. And the spirits cried. They cried.

(Chihuailaf, ‘Mongoley Mapu’ 21)

Lienlaf’s poetry is the result of collaboration with these ‘pained voices’, their potentials ‘rising up’ to him from the ground beneath. If his poetry is miserable, then, it is because country is suffering. The written ‘I’ of his poems is a distribution across country; the poet consoles himself with the presence of the surrounding words (Zurita, ‘El Ave de tu Corazón’ 20-1):

There, in the threshold of misery, he who sings is able to say that he is alive, and that he will be alive while things keep speaking in him and don’t terminally interrupt his dialogue with the earth . . .

NOTES

¹ For a more detailed discussion about relationships between Aboriginal and Mapuche poetics, see S. Cooke. *Speaking the Earth's Languages: a theory for Australian-Chilean postcolonial poetics*. Rodopi: Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2013.

² Leonel Lienlaf, *Pewma Dungu (Palabras Soñadas)*. LOM: Santiago, 2003, 20-21. I have included the Mapuzugun here to highlight some of the differences between it and the Spanish version. The Mapuzugun version has a shape quite distinct from the Spanish translation, not only withholding something of its structure and rhythm from Spanish readers, but also enforcing for us the fact that Lienlaf has very deliberately (re-)structured the translation.

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