

#VoyYVuelvo: Performances of Chilean Identity and Cultural Memory on Instagram after Nicanor Parra's Death

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Abstract: This paper examines an analysis carried out of the mediations and remediations of Nicanor Parra's image and poetry online, focusing on how digital methods can be used for qualitative analysis, their relevance for current research, as well as some ethical considerations. Nicanor Parra was a revolutionary Chilean poet, a national icon whose death in 2018 represented a significant memory site where contemporary understandings of Chilean identity can be studied. Through digital qualitative methods, I traced the use of the hashtag #nicanorparra after his death. The data was analysed using discourse analysis, both textual and visual, to properly weigh the mix of images and captions that Instagram posts offer and interpret how these 'media of memory' articulate discourses around Chilean identity and memory today. The posts constructed a figure of Parra akin to a modern prophet, whose message of "anti-ness" called on users to act on issues such as economic inequality and the impact of industrial development on the country's environment. Through Parra's poetry, digitally expressed through vernacular creativity, a collective mnemonic imagination sketches expectations for Chile, which are particularly crucial after the massive protests demanding profound political and economic change of 2019.

Key Words: Future Memory, Poetry, Identity, Chile, Nicanor Parra, Instagram

1. Introduction

On January 23rd, newspapers around the world mournfully reported the same story: Nicanor Parra, Chile's eminent poet and 'anti-poet,' had died. A quasi-immortal figure, he actively gave interviews and wrote his anti-poetry well after turning 100. He was widely considered one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century with Niall Binns naming him "the most important figure in the history of contemporary Spanish-American poetry: there is a before Parra, and an after Parra" (Binns, 2006, p. xxix).

Parra had come to symbolize something more than himself: an eco-activist, a voice for the marginalized, a professor, a subversive rebel, as well as a symbol of Chilean national identity (Gallardo, 2004; Rodríguez, 2011). The impact of his death was such that thousands took to Instagram to honour him, uploading images with the hashtag #nicanorparra, making his death a significant site of Chilean memory. These posts reveal contemporary articulations of national identity, raising a series of questions: following Parra, what do they tell us about what it means to be "anti" in present-day Chile? And how are these memory discourses staking a claim on the future of the country?

Earlier Chilean poets had written grand poems with erudite language and mystifying references. In contrast, Parra challenged the Chilean establishment and ridiculed those "gods of the Olympus" who he would bring "crashing down" (Parra, 1969). His appeal lay in his strange, self-deprecating, and disruptive anti-poetry, which employed slang-words, proverbs, and popular sayings in the ludic and dramatic rhythm of everyday speech (Binns, 2006; Peña, 2012). With his sarcastic humour and disdain for institutions and ideologies, Parra mocked convention, ridiculed religious and state institutions, and delighted in creating confusion; he was perceived as a people's poet, stating that his poetry came from the mouth of the masses themselves (Grossman, 1975). Poetry should be piercing-sharp to startle the reader and elicit a reaction- an article of first necessity, not an object of luxury or an intellectual exercise for the well-off (Parra, 1969).

How we recall Parra, a poet so important in the Chilean imaginary, is significant. The thousands of mediations and remediations of him and his anti-poetry uploaded to Instagram after his death perform and enact different identities and understandings of Chileanness, as well as conceptions of our past and expectations for our future. Identity and collective memory are on-going processes, in which individuals and communities shift and adapt their connection to the past through symbolic artefacts that keep memory alive and creating communality across space and time (Erll and Rigney, 2012). Social media posts are one form of such symbolic artefacts, as narratives of an experience at a certain moment and place in time are created, collected, and shared.

Matters of identity are especially important when we consider how multiple forces have disrupted Chile's cultural capital: colonialism, elitism and dictatorships have all undermined its symbols, rituals, and popular culture. There have been ongoing tensions between an ideal Chilean citizen and the actual population, creating a compulsion by the socio-economic elite to shut down uncivilized behaviour in order to "better" its citizens (Martín-Barbero, 1987; Donoso Fritz, 2009). And Chile's highly ideological version of neoliberalism, implemented

during Pinochet's military rule, turned Chile into one of the most unequal countries in the world, with solidarity replaced by individualism and consumerism as community ties were increasingly fragmented (Larraín, 2010).

Today Chile is a postmodern society, where identities simultaneously local, global, hybrid, individual and fragmented (Subercaseaux, 2016). As Pinochet's legacy of fear becomes distant with time a young generation of students has dared to take to the streets, demanding free and quality education for all, while a feminist movement swept the country with occupations at dozens of universities and multitudinous protests. Finally, in 2019 widespread protests ground the country to a halt, as citizens demanded radical social, environmental, and economic change. In such an atmosphere, it was especially compelling to study how Parra's legacy of resistance and critique was adopted on Instagram after his death, and what that can tell us about the country today.

1.1 Memory, Identity and Poetry Through the Lens Of Social Media

Today it is widely recognized that when we speak of identity, we refer to a process of "becoming" rather than "being" (Hall, 2000). Identities are not fully constituted and distinct, but relational and incomplete, unstable, and defined by difference; shaped and reshaped through interactions and lived experience, in constant negotiation with hegemonic discourses, cultural and institutional forces, and national, familiar and local contexts which offer degrees of resolution and coherence (Hall, 2000; Frith, 2011). National frameworks in particular continue to be relevant, especially in countries whose cultural capital and histories were ravaged by colonial rule. As an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006) it provides shared ideas, values, histories, and beliefs, as we position ourselves and are positioned by such frameworks (Hall, 2011). And given Chile's fraught history, it is especially important to recognize different identities and accounts in relation to ideas of a national identity (Larraín, 2010). National discourses do not convey a single identity, but encompass plurality, even making "intergenerational and interethnic communication possible" (Martín-Barbero, 2006, p. 43).

Like identity, memory only becomes collective as part of a continuous process of co-creation. Memories do not exist in the physical realm but through active remembering, a process of performance rather than reproduction where some things are remembered, and others forgotten (Erlil and Rigney, 2012). It is an ongoing process shaped by mediations and remediations that take the shape of symbolic artefacts, which then act as intermediaries between people, creating a sense of a common identity in space and time. Furthermore, collective memory not only reflects current anxieties, interests and ambitions; it also provides a model imagine what is to come (Schwartz, 2016). Keightley and Pickering's (2012) concept of mnemonic imagination proved key when analysing memories of the future that came up in the posts examined. These memories of the future cannot be underestimated: forgetting possible outcomes can lead to reduced criticism and action against present social order, whereas imagining new possibilities can help articulate dissatisfactions with the current state of the world (Huysen, 2003). As users actively create messages by taking material and transforming it for their own purposes, they creatively maps what could lie ahead, confirming that "memory is work –creative work-doing or carrying out the act" (Plate and Smelik, 2015, p. 2). Instagram posts are also an example of 'mediated memories', those "enabled by technologies and objects and embedded in social and cultural context of their use" (van Dijck, 2007, p. xiv). They connect between what was and what can be, acts of both recall and projection. Studying "mediated media" such as Instagram posts as symbolic artefacts, the discourses that construct them, and the reception they engender, sheds light on how media reconfigures and shifts our relationship to the past – and to our own selves (van Dijck, 2007; Erlil and Rigney, 2012).

The images and caption uploaded after Parra's death, then, are cultural artefacts, performances and representations of collective identity and memory. They are prime examples of how Internet -and social media in particular- have significantly transformed how collective memory is generated, shared, and stored, and how narratives are circulated and collected by its users (van Dijck, 2007). Social media platforms have become so intensely entwined into everyday life that they have deeply transformed how we attach meaning and significance to our collective experiences; today "networked" identities manifest and establish themselves through a range of online interactions, aiding the articulation and co-construction of who we are.

Nevertheless, specific research on Instagram in particular is lacking and has only just begun. Studies have mostly focused on the conditions of Instagram use or its technical aspects, and not enough on the significance and meanings being conveyed in the images and captions shared. An exception is Becker's (2017) examination of Instagram's potential for agency as a democratic tool of image making in Africa, as novel representations of the continent are created and circulated online, using hashtags to situate an image within a larger collective conversation. These findings echo other studies that have considered how hashtags are used by users in order to place images in wider "hashtag conversations" (Bruns and Burgess, 2011).

This highlights how social media's offers a space for views that would not have an outlet otherwise, and its potential to resist dominant accounts, which is especially significant when considered alongside the disruptive potential of poetry. Poetry alludes, rather than explains; it unsettles, making the familiar seem strange, and illuminating new possibilities for thinking about, and acting upon, the world. It connects perfectly with Parra's irony and penchant for disruption: his poetry always pointed to something different than what appeared at first glance. He recognized that a poet's mission was to help us see the familiar in surprising ways, forcing an unexpected recognition of circumstances we have grown accustomed to (Peña, 2012). By playing with his anti-poetry online, users engage in creative practices of representation and meaning making, disrupting what can be seen, said, and thought in regard to Chile's past, present and future. Aesthetic creations contribute to the construction of a collective identity (Frith, 2011). Agency thus asserts itself through the resignification that takes place, as people appropriate a poem or an image, make it theirs, and project their life and feelings on to it.

2. Methodology

Qualitative methods are appropriate for exploring identity and memory as they bring out meaning in context, uncovering people's sense-making processes and their experiences in the world at a certain moment and place in time. A constructivist epistemological position allowed me to consider the density and diversity of positions and perspectives conveyed in the posts, especially considering memory itself is a construction of reality rather than a replica of the past, constantly shaped by our need to make sense of things and by our relationship to the communities we belong to (Kearney, 2013). Furthermore, memory not only allows to make sense of our past and future experiences, but also has the capacity to subvert power and challenge convention (Keighley and Pickering, 2013).

I applied textual analysis to the posts, following McKee's (2003) framework to emphasize the social construction of a Chilean identity through the different representations that materialized, their underlying assumptions, and the sense making of the world that they uncovered. Writing about memory studies methodologies, Kearney (2013) points out that discourse analysis offers specifically rich opportunities to observe the social production of ideas and value, as different discourses challenge each other's power and authority to truth. Rose's (2012) guidelines proved especially useful regarding discourse analysis in relation to images, being mindful of what clusters of images appear; the discourses they articulate; the associations and connections between them; and the latent meanings that emerge. In spite of my familiarity with some of the images, I strived to approach the material with fresh eyes, immersing myself in the data to uncover the visible as well as the invisible. And because the project is specific to a moment and place in time, my examination of text and image also incorporated historical context. Discourses are articulated and circulated through countless texts, practices, and images, and often media does not convey a single message but conflicting interpretations and readings, making it key to connect the material with broader context and issues of power and hegemony (McKee, 2003; Fürsich, 2009). Thus, I contrast the posts with prevailing discourses regarding Chileanness, and how these are constructed and/or challenged.

Chile has Latin America's largest percentage of citizens who are active social media users (We Are Social, 2018). Instagram in particular has six million active Chilean users as of 2017, a significant amount considering a population of just over 17 million people (INE, 2017). Instagram posts yield spontaneous material, granting access to the unconscious negotiations users engage in with Parra's poetry. In fact, researchers such as Tileaga (2013) have encouraged the use of naturally occurring data (publicly available and independent of the researcher) for discourse analysis. Exploring discourses through a hashtag can give deep insight into people's reaction, attachment, and representations of an event. In terms of ethics, only publicly shared posts were studied, and my access and use fully complied with Pace and Livingston's (2005) guidelines - that the used content is easily accessible to anyone with an Instagram account, does not require a password to be accessed, is not sensitive in nature, and has no prohibitions in relation to its use on Instagram's terms and conditions. In any case, the software used to collect the posts further ensured anonymity by removing all information except image and caption.

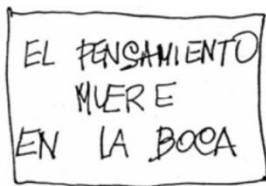
I downloaded all images uploaded to Instagram with the hashtag #NicanorParra between January 23rd and 27th of 2018. Over 10,000 posts came up - further evidence of the significance of Parra's death. To conduct a sensible analysis with a manageable amount of material, the first 300 consecutive files were considered and taken as a snapshot of a broader phenomenon. These were then coded, analysed, and categorized, in order to trace themes, and look for connections and links I might have overlooked. Using textual analysis with an emphasis on discourses and complemented by a visual methodology allowed me to question what is being said, by whom, and in what circumstances; what is being remembered, and what is not; and in short, what is constructed through

this posts and what contradictions appear and along which default lines. Through textual analysis I can arrive at “the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (Fürsich, 2009, p.240) relate them to Chilean identity and memory and unearth how they contradict or echo hegemonic discourses around these topics.

3. “Gone But Will Come Back Soon”: Imagining New Futures

Most of the analysed posts were images of Parra and pictures of specific poems. The captions were complex and well thought out, and in many cases included long paragraphs of carefully written text. From playful farewells to Parra using wordplay, to biographical captions honouring his achievements and importance, I had a significant amount of material to sort through, and a richness of data that yielded surprising results. I will focus on how users creatively appropriated Parra’s poetry and image to imagine new possible futures and resist current conditions of inequality and environmental degradation.

Parra titled himself an anti-poet, tasked with writing anti-poetry. This was a revolutionary declaration that shocked the literary establishment and laid the foundations for his radical work. The prefix clearly resonated: the most used hashtag after #nicanorparra was #anti, and the word was playfully used in several captions, with one user referring to themselves as an “anti-adult” and another to their “anti-work”. But why was the word given such prominence? What does it mean to be “anti” in Chile today? Analysis showed that users articulated Parra’s “anti-ness” as conferring upon him an otherworldly or divine status, constructing the image of a mythical figure, a Chilean Jesus or Zarathustra. Users described Parra as “immortal”, “the great one”, “eternal”. One posts simply thanks him for “leaving us mortals so much”, while others described Parra as a “light” and wished him a “good return to the source”. The emoji of hands in prayer was repeatedly used, as people ask Parra “take me with you”. Some wrote that “Latin American poetry ends with you”, and “I don’t know who will mourn you more, poetry or anti-poetry”. Many highlighted what Parra “taught” them: to value their roots, to see new things, to love poetry. One caption reads: “Until forever #DonNica: your #antipoetry taught us to be creatives, rebels, and irreverent. Today, your legacy takes flight forever”.



“As people have been saying, it was the only thing that was missing for Mr Nicanor to be immortal. A great one #nicanorparra #chileansbelike#CL”



“Poets die everyday: anti-poets die once every geological era. The reason is simple: poets have always existed and will always exist; anti-poets there has only been one, Nicanor Parra. #readforever #nicanorparra”

Figure 1. Post #115.

Figure 2. Post #46.

Parra’s anti-poetry was radical and unsettling, permeated with scepticism, irony and the will to dismantle everything seen as proper or correct, and exposing an alienated world bursting with contradictions. The posts reproduce that challenging and confrontational attitude, symbolically appropriating antipoetry to criticize and oppose, while painting Parra as the bearer of the message. A frequently reposted illustration shows Parra with an impish grin, lifting the middle finger of each hand while being raised up by two naked female angels. Under the trio, the words of Parra’s famous artefact: “Cry if you like, I, for one, die of laughter”.



Figure 3. Posts #172, #180, #184, #241, #247, #285, #286

But what is most significant is what this spirit of anti-ness, this mythical poet, calls on people to do, with two issues coming up repeatedly. The first refers to inequality. Although Chile is pitched to the world as an economic

champion, a developed country, where people travel, shop and spend, the posts shatter the illusion of wellness, exposing a society obsessed with comfort and consumerism but oblivious to the growing wealth gap. As Larraín points out, most people don't have minimum certainties regarding their education, their housing or health, living in dire insecurity with regards to the future (Larraín, 2010, p.18). This contradiction was strongly emphasized in the posts through the use of verses such as "The poor man takes his drink / To compensate for debts / that can not be paid / With tears or strikes", or the famous quote "There are two loaves of bread. You eat two. I eat none. Average consumption: one bread per person". The second issue that came up repeatedly referred to people's concerns regarding the impact of economic progress on the environments and local ecosystems. Again, a handful of verses echoed as a mantra: "Childhood memories: the trees were not yet shaped like furniture and the chickens roamed raw around the landscape" or "The mistake was to believe that the Earth was ours, when the truth is that we are of the Earth".



Figure 4. Post #25.

"Why were we born as men! If they give us a death of animals... poetical acts must also contain politics #nicanorparra"



Figure 5. Post #109

"It's hard to believe how strongly we try to separate ourselves from nature, when we are a tiny part of it, and we should act accordingly #nicanorparra"

Parra's "anti-ness", then, allowed for new discourses, critical of current state of things. This supports Bleiker's (2012) vision of poetry as a vehicle for political reflexion and criticism, with Parra's poetry used to create awareness surrounding issues that had remained hidden or silenced, actively demand better life conditions, deep changes to the economic order, and more protection for the environment. As van Dijck (2009) would have it, it is an active engagement, an expression of user agency through new media (i.e., Instagram), as audiences demand the right to actively participate in content-creation.

In fact, the posts collectively construct a memory that projects itself into the future, not the past. Anti-poems were intended to destruct the status quo, unmasking and demystifying decrepit institutions such as state and church (Binns, 2006). As Parra himself said, the ultimate purpose of the anti-poet was to make the foundations of out-dated and obsolete institutions jump in the air (Parra and Neruda, 1962) and the anti-poem was meant to be the tip of a needle, pricking a balloon that is about to burst (Benedetti, 1972). A post quotes Parra: "I don't see the reason for such a fuss: we already know the world is over". This criticism is framed as engendering successive cycles of creation and destruction: anti-ness as a force and agent of change. Once the "demolition" is complete, there is nothing left to do but build from the ruins and imagine a new tomorrow. It makes sense that in moments of turmoil, when what we knew no longer can be trusted or relied on, people will look to the future for answers. This applies particularly to national identities, which are re-evaluated in times of crisis (Larraín, 2010). When users take on an "anti" stance, rallying against current problems, new discourses regarding the construction of novel futures can emerge. After all, identities are shaped through a narrative, which is animated by an ideal of who we want *to be* (Frith, 1996, p.122).

It is as if Parra had entrusted a mission or a mandate: a user says "remember Chilean friends what Parra has asked" and another wonders "Don Nica, how do you think art can construct Chile's history?". The majority of posts use the future or conditional tense: "I will", "let's make him live", "he will", and the idea of "tomorrow" comes up repeatedly, with one heavily referenced verse saying "Tomorrow is all we have left: / I raise my glass / To that day that never arrives / But which is the only thing / That we really have". Additionally, the theme of the future appears in remediations of Parra's poem in which the words "gone, but will come back soon", a commonly used expression, appear over an empty cross. Phrases such as "once you said "voy y vuelvo": I hope you come back"; "come back whenever you want, don Nicanor"; or "don #NicanorParra you may go, but come back soon!". These posts manifest how users are hoping for a better future, to be realized as they wait for Parra to "come back". One person writes "#NicanorParra has died, the only poet I have seriously read and enjoyed. Read him, my God, you still have time".

The question is, time for what? What is coming, or what will happen, that makes it necessary for us to read Parra? These considerations lead back to the power of the mnemonic imagination, which through a range of practices and processes "allow us to generate transformative accounts of the past that challenge and resists institutionalised versions of historical events or processes and provide the basis for social action in the present"

(Keighley and Pickering, 2012, p.58). Although Chileans lived in fear for many years – even long after the dictatorship was over- it seems that the memory of Parra is calling on people to demand, to protest, to occupy. In fact, many posts directly referenced protests, using pictures in which a photograph of Parra looms in the back. This is quite extraordinary when it is contrasted with data from 2006, when 66.1% of those interviewed responded they would not participate in public protests against government authorities or private corporations (PNUD, 2006, p.293). The posts reflect a generation empowered and committed to change, especially in regard to a system that is perceived as manipulated by the wealthy against the rest of the population). As one post states, “poetical acts must also contain politics”.

These representations of a future are acts of agency, as people act out their identity – in this case struggling against an unsatisfactory present. The mediations and remediations of the posts are tools of self-formation and connection that guide identity and future memory - part of a narration of the project of who we want to be.

4. Conclusion

This paper aimed to contribute to contemporary understandings of Chilean identity and memory. Speaking of a such an identity has always been complex, not only because all identities are plural and continuously shifting, but also because of the impact of colonialism, elitism, Pinochet’s dictatorship and current neoliberal policies on our culture and public consciousness. Still, Parra’s death provided a useful lens to study Chileanness: this owes not only to his importance in the national imaginary, but also because of his praise and celebration of Chilean everyday culture, his use of ordinary language in his work, and his critical attitude towards all institutions and their elitism. By taking Nicanor Parra’s death to be a memory site and studying Instagram posts uploaded in the wake of his death with the hashtag #nicanorparra, I examined contemporary discourses regarding Chileanness and Chilean memory today.

The meanings embodied in these posts were multi-layered and rich, offering an illuminating snapshot of Chile’s memoryscape, and of current values and perspectives in relation to Chileanness. It was evident, after spending time with the posts, that by mediating and remediating Parra’s anti-poems and ideas, Instagram users had a story to tell about Chile today. They constructed Parra as a modern prophet, who spoke out against all manner of institutions, and his criticism and “anti-ness” articulated through texts and images to indict a neoliberal system that has gravely impacted economic equality and Chile’s environment. And by imaginatively projecting their ambitions and desires into the future, users are emotionally connecting with, and becoming more critical of, present contingencies. This supports the demands for major social change that have been expressed outside the online realm: student protests, new political forces, and a burgeoning feminist movement. Thus, users employed the discourses of anti-poetry, a discourse critical of power and the exclusion it forces on people, re-signifying Chileanness and reconstructing a fractured identity.

Still, these findings are subject to limitations. Factors such as gender, religion, class, and other individual characteristics can intersect with media use, to engender diverse performances of national identity. One should be cautious about essentialist assumptions of collective identity, as each individual negotiates their identity differently. This is especially important when considering that these representations were created by a particular group of people, sharing a special interest in Parra - which of course is not the case for all Chileans. The findings could eventually be complemented through interviews and focus groups that expand on people’s perceptions and ambitions with regards to the subject of identity and memory. As the feeling of crisis intensifies, it becomes increasingly important for scholars to study the subject of memories of the future in Chile more profoundly in order to examine what kind of representations, hopes and ambitions are being articulated. Likewise, it seems crucial to examine how the changes that Chileans are demanding could be accomplished: scholars should look at art, public policy and education, and their potential for engendering critical thinking, productive solutions, and more.

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