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Article

Class and Root: Cultural Tensions in Contemporary Chilean Popular and Visual Poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of popular oral traditions and visual poetics in shaping a fragmentary yet persistent idea of Chilean national thought. Drawing on examples from Nicanor Parra's "Discurso Huaso", the *contrapunto* tradition, the visual poetry of Juan Luis Martínez and Cecilia Vicuña, and references to pre-Columbian petroglyphs, this study argues that Chilean poetry functions as a cultural mirror of class tensions and socio-linguistic duality. Employing a hermeneutic and socio-semiotic approach, the paper analyses selected texts and visual artifacts to reveal how popular and elite discourses collide and hybridize. Results indicate that the resilience of oral structures and visual symbols sustains a narrative of identity that defies homogeneous national myths. The discussion situates these findings within Latin American literary and cultural theory, suggesting that the interplay of voice, image, and social strata in Chilean poetry offers critical insights into the broader question of how language embodies power and resistance. The paper concludes by proposing further comparative research linking contemporary urban music, cinema, and indigenous iconography to this enduring poetic discourse.

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1. Introduction

The idea of a unified "Chilean thought" is, in essence, an illusion: Chile's cultural identity has been historically fractured by colonization, territorial disputes, class stratification, and a deep linguistic duality that spans from pre-Columbian symbols carved in stone to the contradictory discourses of its modern intellectuals. Despite this fragmentation, a persistent symbolic thread binds popular oral traditions and avant-garde visual poetry, revealing how class tensions and local cosmologies shape national self-understanding.

This study examines how Chilean popular and visual poetry embody and negotiate these contradictions. It begins by situating the historical roots of Chilean language and poetry in the colonial epic *La Araucana* (Ercilla, 2018) and the pre-Hispanic geoglyphs and petroglyphs of the Atacama and Lluta valleys (Campbell et al., 2020). From these origins, the Chilean poetic voice oscillates between high culture and vernacular improvisation: the *contrapunto* contests of the 19th century illustrate a live, combative oral tradition where social classes verbally confront each other through satire and insult (Muñoz, 1972; Hernández, 2016).

This duality resurfaces in the modern era through figures such as Nicanor Parra and his *Discurso Huaso*, which articulates a sarcastic, rural register that mocks urban and academic pretensions (Jimenez, 2009). Violeta Parra extends this tension visually in her tapestries and songs, claiming that "the entire people of Chile are artists" (Parra, 2017). Similarly, Juan Luis Martínez's *La Nueva Novela* and Cecilia Vicuña's visual collages transform words into spatial objects, echoing ancient symbolic carvings while disintegrating the author's ego into a dispersed communal voice (Martínez, 2016; Vicuña, 2007).

The present article argues that these aesthetic strategies—oral defiance, visual symbolism, and class-inflected irony—coalesce into an unstable yet resilient discourse of national identity. It asks: *How do Chilean popular and visual poetic forms mediate class conflict and cultural self-perception?* Addressing this question, the paper applies a hermeneutic and socio-semiotic method to examine representative texts and images, tracing the continuity between historical roots and contemporary expressions.

The aim is twofold: first, to demonstrate that Chilean poetry is not merely an artistic product but a discursive battlefield where social power and cultural memory collide; second, to contribute to broader Latin American debates on how literature and visual arts function as repositories and agents of national thought in contexts marked by inequality and syncretism.

2. Results

The analysis of the selected corpus—spanning traditional popular poetry, modern experimental texts, and visual poetics—reveals three interrelated dynamics that illuminate the role of poetic discourse in negotiating Chilean class tensions and cultural identity.

3.1. Endurance of Oral Structures and Irony

Firstly, the oral tradition's resilience emerges clearly in the *Discurso Huaso* and *contrapunto* contests. Nicanor Parra's *Discurso Huaso* typifies a performative, self-regulating mode of rural speech marked by irony and collective scrutiny: "The only possible discourse today is the huaso discourse... If someone speaks too academically, the crowd mocks him: 'Next time bring a dictionary!'" (Jimenez, 2009). This playful resistance to urban and academic authority echoes older forms of improvisational duels, where singers like the mulato Taguada and Don Javier de la Rosa competed for social prestige through insult and wit (Hernández, 2016).

This dynamic demonstrates how popular oral registers persist as vehicles for critique and as symbolic spaces where class boundaries are negotiated rather than passively accepted.

3.2. Visuality as Continuity of Symbolic Language

Secondly, the visual dimension of Chilean poetry connects modern artistic experimentation with ancient symbolic practices. The Atacama petroglyphs and geoglyphs (Campbell et al., 2020; Reyes, 2004) served as communal records, embedding social and spiritual meaning into landscape. This motif resurfaces in the work of Cecilia Vicuña, who writes: "The fate of paintings that spring from darkness is to remain in darkness" (Vicuña, 2007). Similarly, Juan Luis Martínez's *La Nueva Novela* transforms the book into an interactive, quasi-ritual object: readers are invited to insert death certificates of Chilean poets, embedding materiality and mortality into the textual experience.

Thus, visual poetry in Chile prolongs an ancient semiotic continuity: it enacts a layered dialogue between word, image, space, and collective memory.

3.3. Fluidity of Class and Cultural Appropriation

Thirdly, the texts and artifacts reveal that poetic discourse fluidly traverses class lines. Parra, a university physicist, adopts the rural huaso voice; Violeta Parra's folk art elevates vernacular forms into museum contexts; Luis Rivano, an ex-policeman and street bookseller, self-publishes raw narratives of Santiago's underclass, defying literary gatekeeping.

This hybridization is not merely stylistic but structural: the popular and elite discourses mutually infiltrate each other, forging a poetic voice that is both subversive and inclusive. The *contrapunto* epitomizes this when the learned Don Javier de la Rosa wins not only with wit but through books—"He did not win; his books won" (Hernández, 2016)—underscoring that education and orality coexist in a dynamic power play.

Collectively, these results suggest that Chilean poetry, far from being a monolithic national symbol, is a contested, living practice that enacts class struggles within its own linguistic and visual fabric.

3. Discussion

The findings confirm that Chilean popular and visual poetry operates as a dynamic site where social class tensions are both mirrored and contested. This challenges any essentialist notion of a homogeneous national thought and aligns with broader Latin American theoretical perspectives that view literature as a space of negotiation and speculative experimentation (Ludmer, 2010; Laddaga, n.d.).

First, the endurance of oral structures—exemplified by the *contrapunto* and *Discurso Huaso*—supports Eagleton’s (2012) assertion that literature functions as an “event” where social signification occurs through performative enactment rather than static representation. In Chile, this is particularly evident in the sarcastic interplay between rural and urban registers. The tension is not merely rhetorical: it reflects deep-seated class distinctions and the constant contestation of legitimacy between academic elites and popular voices.

Second, the visual dimension extends this dialectic by embedding symbolic codes within material forms. Vicuña’s insistence that certain images “must remain in darkness” (Vicuña, 2007) and Martínez’s invitation to “complete” his book with death certificates illustrate how Chilean visual poetics deliberately blur the line between author and audience, text and ritual. This echoes pre-Columbian petroglyphs, which also used spatial inscription to convey communal memory and territorial identity (Campbell et al., 2020).

Third, the fluid appropriation across class lines complicates binary oppositions. The fact that elite poets adopt vernacular modes while marginal figures like Rivano achieve canonical relevance through self-publication reflects what Ludmer describes as “speculation from here” (2010): a Latin American condition in which cultural production is inherently unstable, mixing high and low, global and local, written and spoken.

Together, these dynamics reveal that Chilean poetry does not merely document social conditions but actively intervenes in the reproduction of class discourse. It builds what Laddaga (n.d.) terms “spectacles of reality,” wherein literature and visual art become laboratories for alternative social imaginaries.

This reading complicates national identity narratives by foregrounding contradiction as a constitutive feature. Rather than resolving the tension between elite and popular cultures, Chilean poetic forms sustain it, transforming conflict into a generative force for artistic and social renewal.

Finally, this discussion suggests that future analyses should expand this framework beyond poetry to examine other cultural practices—such as urban music (trap, reggaetón) and independent cinema—that continue to negotiate the same discursive tensions within new media ecologies.

4. Materials and Methods

This research adopts a qualitative hermeneutic and socio-semiotic approach, focusing on a purposive selection of Chilean poetic and visual texts that exemplify the intersection of popular oral traditions, visual symbolism, and class discourse.

Corpus selection:

The primary corpus comprises:

- Oral poetry samples from *Poesía Popular Chilena* (Muñoz, 1972) and the documented *contrapunto* between the mulato Taguada and Don Javier de la Rosa (Hernández, 2016).
- Nicanor Parra’s *Discurso Huaso* and related anti-poetry statements (Jimenez, 2009).
- Selected works by Violeta Parra, including statements on her tapestries and songs (Parra, 2017).

- Juan Luis Martínez's *La Nueva Novela* (Martínez, 2016) and Cecilia Vicuña's *Sabor a Mí* (Vicuña, 2007).
- Contextual reference to pre-Columbian petroglyphs and geoglyphs from the Atacama and Lluta valleys (Campbell et al., 2020; Reyes, 2004).

Selection criteria:

Texts and artifacts were chosen based on their explicit articulation of vernacular registers, visual symbolism, and references to social stratification. Priority was given to works cited in recognized academic studies and included in the author's prior research.

Analytical framework:

A hermeneutic reading was applied to uncover the rhetorical and symbolic strategies through which these works negotiate cultural identity and class boundaries. Simultaneously, a socio-semiotic lens was used to analyze how visual and oral elements encode communal memory and resistance.

Procedure:

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Contextual reading: situating each work within its historical, socio-cultural, and authorial context.
2. Thematic coding: identifying recurring motifs related to class, irony, popular voice, and visual symbolism.
3. Comparative synthesis: tracing continuities and ruptures across oral, textual, and visual forms, connecting them to broader Latin American cultural theory.

No statistical or computational methods were used, as the study focuses on interpretive and discursive patterns within qualitative humanities research norms.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Chilean popular and visual poetry functions as a complex cultural practice where oral traditions, visual symbolism, and class discourse intersect to shape an unstable yet resilient sense of national thought. By tracing continuities from pre-Hispanic petroglyphs to the performative *Discurso Huaso* and experimental visual poetry, the analysis confirms that contradiction—rather than cohesion—is the defining condition of Chilean poetic expression.

Far from being a passive reflection of social realities, poetry in Chile actively mediates class tensions, transforming them into sites of negotiation and creative resistance. Popular voices infiltrate elite literary spaces, while academic figures appropriate vernacular registers, blurring the boundaries between high and low culture. This dynamic affirms that Chilean poetic forms are not static national symbols but living processes of cultural self-articulation.

The findings suggest that this hybrid poetic discourse offers valuable insights for broader debates on Latin American identity, literature, and socio-semiotics. Future research should extend this framework to examine how contemporary urban music genres, independent cinema, and digital visual cultures continue to negotiate similar tensions in new expressive environments.

In this sense, the Chilean case underscores a generalizable lesson: where language, image, and social stratification meet, culture becomes both an archive of memory and a battlefield of power.

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