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Native testimony in the Americas

Native Americans' tenacity and resilience against overwhelming odds is demonstrated by the poetry of a new literary resurgence

AS A RESULT of invasion from beyond its shores, the so-called New World has suffered uniquely: in the course of just a few centuries its original inhabitants, though settled there for millennia and countable in many millions, have come to be perceived as a marginal if not entirely dispensable factor in the continent's destiny. Educational systems in its modern nation-states seldom relate surviving indigenous peoples to their deeper past, and history, like literature, law and philosophy, is most often said to have begun with Columbus. In 1927, the poet César Vallejo noted how western imperialism had robbed China of all but its land and people and wondered whether even those minima would survive in his native Peru.

Despite much triumphalism, the 1992 quincentenary had the advantage of re-focusing attention on these issues, not least among America's native peoples themselves. In July 1990, representatives of over a hundred nations gathered in Quito (Ecuador) at a continental conference called by the Indigenous Alliance of the Americas, to review the experience of the last five centuries. Agreement was reached on eight points, in a declaration that begins: '[We] have never abandoned our struggle against the oppression, discrimination and exploitation imposed on us as a result of Europe invading our ancestral territories.' Going deeper than political alliance, their unanimity drew on notions not only of native dispossession, but of human survival. Unlike the international capitalism that to date has been responsible for such abuse, Articles Three and Six of the Quito Declaration refer to the communally held faith in the earth matrix and to the life-philosophy that explicitly defends natural

resources. Note was also taken of how in American 'Third World' states, 'national juridical structures...are the result of...neocolonisation' (Article Eight).

This resurgence has its literary as well as its political edge. Affirming his identity as an Acoma, Simon Ortiz put it like this: 'At times, in the past, it was outright armed struggle, like that of the present-day indians in Central and South America with whom we must identify; urgently, it is often in the legal arena, and it is in the field of literature.' This coincides with the Brazilian Márcio Souza's view of literary engagement as 'counter massacre': here, native language and history themselves serve as a resource in the struggle against the physical and intellectual violence of neo-colonialism.

Chile has recently witnessed a Mapuche literary renaissance led by Sebastian Queupul, Martin Alonqueo, Elicura Chihuailaf, Victorio Pranao (and others who have appeared in the 'Küme dungu' series of texts published in collaboration with the University of Temuco), and, above all, by Leonel Lienlaf, whose collection *Nepey ñi gñunun piuke* (The bird of my heart awoke) appeared in 1989.

For Lienlaf the mountain that saved people from the flood, Threng-threng, still serves as a promise of refuge when seen from a boat out at sea 'Ül pu challwafe' (Song in a boat); and in Temuco, south of Santiago and at the heart of Mapuche territory, another mountain, Ñielol, remembers the quite recent times when none of the houses there was western:

Kautinleufü
ranginmew müley
ngümanmew nagküley
Temukowariapüle
ngümanmekey

The river Cautin
 through the middle
 runs crying
 through Temuco
 crying

Ñielotwinkul
anüley lelitupelu
füchakeruka
mapuchenoruka
rakiduamküley

Ñielol mountain
 sits watching
 large houses
 non-Mapuche houses
 it thinks

Temuko-waria
mi iñchemew
umagtumekey

Temuco town
 beneath you
 are sleeping



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Mapuche women, Chile

*ñifüchake cheyem
Pewmanmew
Müley yengün
ka witrumekey
leufümew
ñi mollün*

my ancestors
Dreaming their dream
they are
in the river
runs
their blood

Yet in 'Chol kin munguey' (They tore the skin off his back), the wounds inflicted by the savage invasions of the late-nineteenth century, on both sides of the Andes, threaten even the idea of native coherence.

In a further poem 'Rupamum' (Footsteps), the Spanish vocabulary that denotes the means of oppression (cross, sword) is made to intrude painfully into the Mapuche text, in images of considerable violence:

*mutrungreke trekan
chew ñi rupamum füchake antikuyem
ngümanmew ayenmew
dakinmew ñi pewma*

Through the tree-trunk
I walked a hundred generations
suffering laughing
within my soul



Quechua musician, Peru

*ina pen kine cruz katrünmaetew
ñi lonko
ka kiñe espada bendecipectew
petu ñi lanon*

then I saw a cross severing
my head
a sword blessing me
before my death

Facing invasion today in Peru, in a civil war brought on by centuries of racist outrage against them, the Quechua draw on a rich precedent, as poets, musicians and members of theatre groups like *Yuyachkani*. A preferred poetic form has been the *wayno*, whose roots go back to the Inca court. The political leader Lio Quintanilla chose the *wayno* to celebrate the taking back of stolen peasant lands in Andahuaylas in 1972; urging resistance in his hometown Huamanga (Ayacucho) in another piece in the same form, Eusebio Huamani decries the *sinchi* police, whose mottled green uniforms identify them as arrogant parrots that infest home and fields. A *wayno* of quite devastating power is 'Viva la patria' by Carlos Falconi, which like Lienlaf's 'Rupamum' uses the technique of incorporating Spanish words, this time into Quechua, in order to deconstruct and ultimately revile them, to the extent that the 'patria' in question is exposed as vicious hypocrisy, an imposition both incoherent and insulting on all those who are not Latin or white:

Takichum takisqay wiqichum wiqillay

When the eyes of children

warmachakunapa ñawichallampi
Chiqnikuy huntaptin
Takichum takisqay wiqichum
y wiqilla

Vinchus viudalla asirillanmanchu

Cangallu viuda kusirikunmanchu

allqupa churinta unanchallanmanchu

pimanraq kutinga sapan paloma
quru sacha hina mana piniyuq.

Sipillawaptimpas sayarimusaqmi
chakiytawiptimpas sayarimusaqmi

makichallaykita haywaykullaway

utqaymi purinay, qamllama allinlla
Huamanga del alma, hatarillasunmi!

 - qawachan -

Vacaytaqa nakankutaq

radiuyulaqa apankutaq
'cholo tu madre' niwankutaq
'viva la patria' niwankutaq
'viva la patria' niwankutaq.

fill with hate
 can my song still be sung?
 Can my lament still be
 a lament?

 The widow from
 Vinchos, will she laugh?
 The widow from Cangallo,
 will she be happy?
 The son of a dog, will she
 love as her own?
 Who will the lone dove rely on
 like a sick tree, with no-one

 Even if they kill me I will stand
 even if they break my feet I
 will stand
 Reach me your hand of
 solidarity I need to travel fast
 See you soon, be well
Huamanga del alma, we will arise

 - coda -

 Their style is to slaughter
 my cow
 steal my radio
 say 'your wog mother'
 say '*viva la patria*'
 say '*viva la patria*'

The question of racial conflict and of identity within the nation-state recurs in Mexico where modern authors still, or again, turn to Nahuatl, the language once spoken at the courts of Tenochtitlana and Texcoco. This recuperation may involve no more than re-stating the aesthetics and philosophy of 'flower-song' (*xochi-cuicatl*), that is, Nahuatl poetry itself; hence, Natalio Hernández Hernández's poem '*Nocolhua cuicate*' (Our ancestral singers) delicately revives the binary phrasing of the sixteenth century *Cantares mexicanos* manuscript in invoking the old capacity to 'say and know', 'say and sing'. Or, as in a poem by Fausto Hernández

Hernández, a traditional mode like the ‘orphan song’ (*icno-cuicatl*) may be employed to express the current predicament of children and families in Nahuatl-speaking Veracruz who have been abandoned by parents obliged to migrate to alien cities: the title ‘*Tótotl*’ ([migrant] bird) can refer to either gender, women having in fact borne much of this burden, earning money as they can in the hope of eventually helping those they left behind. In his ‘*Keski nauamaseualme tiistoke?*’ (How many Nahuas are we?), Luis Reyes laconically refers to official census figures for Nahuatl-speakers and the not-so-secret desire of the *coyotes* (whites) to see them dwindle:

*Kenke, tle ipampa,
kitemojtokej matipoliuikan?
Ax moneki miak tiknemilisej
se tsontli xiuitl techmachte
tlen kineki koyotl.
Koytl kieleuia total
kieliuia tokuatitla
kieleuia toateno
kieleuia tosiuulis
kieleuia toitonalis.
Koyotl kineki matinemikan
uejueyi altepetl itempan
nupeka matixijxipetsncmikan
nupeka matiapismikikan
nupeka matokamokajkayauakan

nupeka matokamauiltikan.

koyotl kineki matimochiuakan
tiitlakeualuan.
Yeka kineki matikauakan
tokomontlal
tokomonteki
tomaseualteki
tomaseualtlajtol
yeka kineki matikilkauakan
tomaseualtlaken
tomaseualnemilis*

Why, for what reason
do they want us to disappear?
Not much thought is needed
four hundred years have taught us
what coyote wants.
Coyote fancies our land
fancies our woods
fancies our rivers
fancies our labour
fancies our sweat.
Coyote wants us to live
in the slums of big cities
there to live naked
there to starve to death
there to become objects
of their deceit
there to become objects
of their game.
Coyote wants us on his payroll

That’s why he wants us to give up
our communal lands
our communal labour
our native tasks
our native speech
that’s why he wants us to forget
our native clothes
our native way of life

tomaseuallanamikilis.
Koyotl achto techkoyokuepa
uan teipa techtlachtekilia
nochi tlen touaxka
nochi tlen titlaeliltia
nochi tlen mila tlaelli
kichteki tosiouilis
kichteki totekipanolis.

our native way of thought.
 First *coyote* turns us into *coyotes*
 then he steals from us
 all that is ours
 all that we produce
 all that the *milpa* produces
 he steals our fatigue
 he steals our work.

WORKS BY Dzul Poot, Paulino Yama and other modern Maya authors in Yucatan carry forward a literary tradition which, in celebrating Maya polity, stretches back unbroken over 1,500 years or more to the hieroglyphic texts of the classic-period cities. At the hard interface in Chiapas, Petu' Krus writes in Tzotzil Maya about survival as a woman, while in neighbouring Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchú shows in her autobiography how culture continues to be sustained by the cosmogony and beliefs recorded in the *Popol vuh*, the sixteenth-century classic in her language (Quiché-Maya). At the same time, besides Nahuatl and Maya, other Mesoamerican languages like Zapotec and Otomi (Ñahnu), which belong to the ancient Otomanguan family, are becoming better known through alphabetic texts. One such is Thaayrohyadi Bermudez's '*Tsi Mahkitee Lerma*', a heartfelt Otomi ode to the 'father-river' Lerma which denounces pollution in political and cosmic terms and passes on its ecological message by honouring the old water gods.

A decisive factor in these examples — Mapuche, Quechua, Nahuatl, Maya, Otomi — is the principle of continuity, of knowable history whose beginnings long antedate Columbus and which, in the last instance, is inseparable from the vaster story of the world ages or 'suns' told in the *Popol vuh*. Native American tenacity and resilience in the face of such massive assault, and apparently against all technological odds, argue for belief that is both practicable and renewable. As the Quito Declaration tells us, its source lies in cosmogony, in ancient yet modern accounts of how the earth was and still is being formed and how we as a species have come to inhabit it. □

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