

11-2015

The Mapuche in Modern Chile: A Cultural History

Ramón J. Guerra

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Guerra, Ramón J. (2015) "The Mapuche in Modern Chile: A Cultural History," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 5, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.5.1.1098>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol5/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Review

The Mapuche in Modern Chile: A Cultural History

Joanna Crow. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. 272pp.

Ramón J. Guerra^{*}

In Joanna Crow's cultural exposition of Chile's largest indigenous population, *The Mapuche in Modern Chile: A Cultural History*, she makes a concerted effort to highlight the cultural components of the group's identity and presence both in negotiation with and in resistance to the larger Chilean state throughout history. As a primary target of her research, the post-colonial approach illuminates the agency-driven Mapuche as being continuously reimagined in the nation's history—not necessarily restructured but more to the point of being *reconsidered*. In order to elicit this type of reconsideration, Crow exposes the prominence of the "historic Mapuche" image as the dominant cultural marker of their existence. One particular manner in which she stresses this reality is in her highlighting of the performative nature of the touristy postcards of present-day Chile and their harkening back to late nineteenth century "indigenous identity" in the way that the contemporary audience desires to conceive of them permanently. The effect that these tourist-driven, souvenir items have in cementing a desired narrative is similar to the problematic historiographic procedures in many global scenarios of colonial and post-colonial relationships. It highlights the mythos-laden identity of an indigenous people as one that is permanently construed as a "people of the past" and therefore negates their

^{*} **Ramón J. Guerra** is associate professor of english and Latino/Latin American studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He researches the Latino literary experiences of the twentieth century with a specific focus on *testimonios* and their importance as both an historical and literary contribution. He examines the significances of nonfiction witness accounts, oral histories, memoirs, and other cultural contributions all under the category of *testimonio* as a means to expand historiography through literature. He has published works on the *testimonios* of Mexican immigrants, the "American Dream" for Mexican Americans, and on writers Américo Paredes and Sandra Cisneros. He is also the co-editor in chief of JOLLAS (Journal of Latino and Latin American Studies).

place in the present and reinforces the conception of their status as precarious. By further analyzing the historic relationship between the Mapuche and the Chilean state, Crow's book aims to garner a deeper understanding of not just the Mapuche resistance to oppression and being "myth-made" but also the efforts to integrate themselves into modern-day political and social arenas.

When describing the function of her book, Crow states that the six chapters strive to "draw our attention to the images and words produced by a wide array of Mapuche and Chilean artists, intellectuals, and writers, and by the state apparatus, from the late nineteenth century through to the present-day, in order to deepen our understanding of the complex and shifting racial dynamics of Chilean society" (5). In this way the research is guided by a cultural lens intent on critiquing objects or products of culture—images, written words, oral histories, and art, etc.—as reflections of their respective social, political, and historical climates. Furthermore, in order to highlight the work's focus on the particulars of *cultural production* rather than political, social, or historical topics of inquiry, Crow imposes a set of questions that have driven the focus of the work to seek out the ways that social/political/historical phenomenon may be expressed and later considered through *cultural expression*. Among the lines of inquiry she pursues are:

What did military conquest in the late nineteenth century mean for the Mapuche, beyond the obvious economic, political, and territorial consequences? What did they say about it in their letters to state authorities? How did they narrate it in their memoirs? ...How did governing elites and Chilean musicians incorporate indigenous peoples into their discourses of revolutionary change? What kind of language did they use? How did Mapuche organizations address government officials during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet? How did they use the press to voice their condemnation of the new land division laws?

What significance did folkloric festivals have for them? (5–6)

While the questions may be striving towards social/political/historical considerations, the means of cultivating the information is intent on drawing from cultural aspects. Furthermore, in post-colonial based questions like these which are focused on cultural production, there is an implicit influence of Marxist and Fanonian responses to colonialism of the type expressed within Kenyan post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o's concept of the "cultural bomb." In this conceptually violent, culturally motivated phenomenon, "The effect ... is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environments, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves."¹ Crow's guiding questions—which essentially ask: *How did the responses from Mapuche look? What things did they say? How? Where? What artistic responses emerged?*—suggest a recognition of the negotiation and response to the effects of a cultural bomb. These responses have social/political/historical ramifications but are borne of cultural production.

One example of this cultural/historical reconsideration that Crow describes is the paradox created by the simultaneous celebration of the "heroic" Mapuche freedom fighters of the early independence period defending themselves against the Spanish conquistadors and the contemporary disregard or outright disdain for the contemporary Mapuche people. She cites the epic poetry of the sixteenth century Spanish soldier, Alonso de Ercilla, and its praise of the noble indigenous warriors of the time as an inspiration to early Chilean nationalist sentiment as well as to scholars like Ventura Marín who came centuries after and who in 1827 looked back to these "Demi-Gods" of the early indigenous resistance asking "is the Greek Hercules not notably inferior to the Chilean Caupolicán?" (10).² The resemblance to the desired image of a noble, historic figure in the touristy postcard is uncanny. By acknowledging a paradox like this, Crow makes a prominent case for a work like hers that strives to present the persistent reactions to this historic miscomprehension and erasure. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o states in the response from those suffering the effects of the cultural bomb, "The classes fighting against imperialism even in its neo-colonial state and form, have to confront this threat with the higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle" (Thiong'o 1986: 3). Crow is presenting the cultural production and existence of the Mapuche as responsible for drawing determined focus to the ongoing cultural identity and presence of a people who have experienced colonization in a variety of forms including geographically, culturally, and historiographically.

The book's chapters approach the Mapuche history in Chile through a mostly chronological progression from the mid-nineteenth century occupation of Araucanía (in which Mapuche controlled lands were "reconceptualized and re-presented as 'territory inhabited by indigenous people' or as 'frontier lands'" [19]); through agrarian, peasant-centered reforms of the mid-twentieth century; through the popular movement of

Salvador Allende of the 1960s and 1970s and the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet of the 1970s and 1980s; and finally to the modern-day in which debates over how the presence and extent of internal colonization histories are being accurately represented and disseminated to the public at large. Crow's major point as she works through the Chilean history is the ever-present face of the Mapuche at various, significant epochs of the nation's growing identity. She explains the importance of promoting this activist state of being as historical and continuous rather than a modern-day occurrence, even perhaps invoking the manipulation of 1890s era Mapuche postcards as a misleading marker of the voices of the indigenous. In reference to the emergence of post-1990 state led efforts in post-dictatorship Chile to encourage the nation's multiculturalism and the Mapuche participation in those efforts, she states, "One of the aims of my book is to show that this is not a new phenomenon of the 1990s, but rather that the Mapuche have been speaking out, telling Chilean society about their histories and making complaints and demands of the state ever since they were first incorporated into that state" (14).

It is clear in Crow's approach that it is particularly important that the Mapuche, as any indigenous, post-colonial population, be seen as participatory in the preservation of their history, memory, and presence. Whereas multiple representations of the past are constantly in dialogue with one another, Crow's approach to the Mapuche representation in Chilean history is that their voice, expressed in their cultural production, be recognized as both significant and ongoing. In her concluding statements, Crow refers back to her original discussion of the postcard image that displays the "clichéd Mapuche figures of old." She mentions that this postcard exhibit is displayed in the same cultural center as an exhibition of the artist Violeta Parra, generally considered to be the founder of the New Chilean Song Movement that renewed and reinvented Chilean folk music beginning the 1950s. Crow writes that Parra "claimed an indigenous great grandmother, interpreted indigenous ceremonies in her music, spoke out against indigenous people's suffering, and often wore indigenous peasant clothes" (131). With this paradox in messages about indigeneity's cultural prominence in Chilean history on display—one message offering a desired "people of the past" and the other promoting constant reconsidering of the indigenous image in contemporary times—Crow summarizes the opposing depictions of the presence of indigenous within national identities with understated accuracy as she calmly surmises its commonality, "the competing narratives resemble debates taking place in 'multicultural' nations throughout Latin America" (229).

NOTES

1. The “cultural bomb” definition is laid out by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986: 3).
2. Caupolicán was a military leader of the Mapuche people during the sixteenth century and was in command of their forces during the first uprising against the Spanish conquistadors from 1553 to 1558.

REFERENCE

Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ wa. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: J. Currey).