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Mark J. Mascia

Sacred Heart University, masciam@sacredheart.edu

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Mascia, Mark J., "Redefining Civilization: Historical Polarities and Mythologizing in Los Con Quistadores of Pablo Neruda's Canto General" (2007). *Languages Faculty Publications*. Paper 10.
http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/lang_fac/10

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REDEFINING CIVILIZATION: HISTORICAL POLARITIES AND MYTHOLOGIZING IN LOS CONQUISTADORES OF PABLO NERUDA'S CANTO GENERAL

Mark Mascia

Pablo Neruda's poetic history of Latin America, *Canto general* (1950), is perhaps best known for its lyricized defense of oppressed and subjugated peoples throughout Latin America, as the author had perceived them. This collection, organized into fifteen sections (often, though not always, linear in its chronicling of Latin American history), treats this social theme from Pre-Columbian times through the mid-Twentieth Century. In addition, the collection is clearly infused with a profoundly Marxist ideology, as well as a call to arms against powers which Neruda had perceived as aggressors, namely the United States and a number of its corporate interests abroad.¹ The third section, *Los conquistadores*, focuses specifically on the critical time period following Columbus' initial arrival in the Western Hemisphere, and recounts the conquest and initial efforts of colonization on the part of the nascent Spanish empire. Like many of the subsequent sections of the collection, *Los conquistadores* presents a clear and unambiguous demarcation between victims (in this instance, indigenous peoples of Latin America) and oppressors (Europeans, particularly the Spanish). This article aims to show that in *Los conquistadores*, Neruda intends to demythologize the standard recounting of the Conquest as a heroic period of achievement for Western Civilization by deliberately remythologizing the same time period as a bloody and shameful one.² *Los conquistadores* is founded on a discourse of violence which, while

¹ For a discussion of the development of Neruda's social poetry and the Marxist political ideology embedded within, see Alazraki 173-192. Neruda's social and political preoccupations predate the *Canto general*, and are generally considered to commence with his witnessing of the Spanish Civil War and with his subsequent volume, *España en el corazón* (1937).

² This remythologizing is not exclusively limited to *Los conquistadores*. Iris Chaves Alfaro notes that from the collection's first poem, "Amor América (1400)," Neruda

providing an alternative view of Latin American history that was not particularly common at the time, creates a polarized and oppositional view of different civilizations (indigenous and Spanish) by inverting their standard characterization, which, as Saúl Yurkiévich states, attempts to "revise history [that of Latin America] as a permanent confrontation between oppressors and liberators" (112; translation mine).³ It will become clear that the Spanish—traditionally seen as the harbingers of order, progress, and civilization to the Western Hemisphere—are now largely demonized for their destruction of existing civilizations, whereas the various indigenous cultures of Latin America are instead linked to peacefulness, moral rectitude, and solemn and justifiable defense of their invaded lands. Along with this notion will appear the idea that the Spanish do not "belong to the earth," while native Latin Americans are viewed as autochthonous (in a simultaneously figurative and literal sense as being "born from the earth") and in harmony with a natural world which is treated as a living entity.⁴ This native Latin American world will also become the mythologized *patria* of the author. In sum, *Los conquistadores* is an equally polarized revision and redefinition of history which creates an anti-myth of a violent encounter between cultures.

Perhaps the most fundamental principle that must be noted when reading *Los conquistadores*, as well as the rest of the *Canto general*, is that the historical rendering of Latin America and Neruda's perception of its societies are based upon betrayal. Roberto González-Echevarría speaks of this in his introduction to Jack Schmitt's English translation of the work. González-Echevarría notes that the original inhabitants of Latin America—the cultures with whom Neruda polemically sides throughout *Los conquistadores*—possessed an "allegiance of a collectivity with nature to create beauty and justice"—an allegiance, however, which later would be "marred by violence, abuse, and betrayal"

begins a process of recovering lost memory and "una remitificación" (57) of ancient native Latin American cultures. Similarly, Rovira places Neruda's treatment of the indigenous world within the broader task of the poet's "actividad mitificadora" (29). *Los conquistadores* simply contextualizes this within the general time frame of the Conquest.

³ "Reseñar su historia [la de Latinoamérica] como enfrentamiento permanente entre opresores y liberadores."

⁴ Margarita Feliciano has characterized Neruda's conception of Latin America as a "madre telúrica" (110), and, along with a number of other scholars, likens his treatment of nature and the Western hemisphere to that of the American poet, Walt Whitman. For further examination of the ways in which Neruda treated nature in Latin America in the *Canto general* as a work articulated specifically during the 1940s, see Fernández.

(Schmitt 7). This notion of betrayal at the hands of the conquering Spaniards (and, in later sections of the collection, at the hands of dictators and foreign companies) forms the "foundational story" of the entire poetic work; as González-Echevarría describes, betrayal "is an evil act committed by men in full knowledge of their own doings" (9). This betrayal attempts to break what the poet perceives as humanity's rightful relationship to the earth. This notion is perhaps most applicable in the very first instance in the collection in which betrayal occurs on a mass scale, in *Los conquistadores*. González-Echevarría also alludes to the autochthonous portrayal of native Latin Americans in describing the notion of betrayal: "Betrayal is the leitmotiv of [*Canto general*], the culmination of which is the betrayal of the land itself... the very ground, the clay out of which humanity emerged innocent, uncorrupted, clean" (11). As a result, betrayal acquires considerable significance: not only is betrayal wantonly immoral in itself in that it affords people from opposing cultures the ability to usurp others and take away what was rightfully theirs, but also it aims specifically at those whose lives were forged out of nature itself and who were born from the earth, living in a peaceful and symbiotic coexistence with it.

The structure of *Los conquistadores* also reflects the overall structure of the rest of the work. As Juan Villegas observes, the various sections of *Canto general*

reiteran en sí, en unidades menores, la estructura total del poema. Hay un desplazamiento desde el caos o el infortunio hacia la esperanza y la felicidad, ya sea personal o social. (*Estructuras míticas* 75)

In this poetic structure, as applied specifically to *Los conquistadores*, indigenous people are presented as the victim of oppression from outsiders who invade their land and abuse it for their own profit. However, the oppressed natives unite their strength to try to resist the invaders and fight them, regardless of the outcome. At the end of the section appears the hope of restoration and unity once again between people and the land, after the long periods of suffering have passed. Marjorie Agosin notes this general pattern as well, and adds that this structure employs Marxist notions of dialectical materialism (as Neruda was an avowed Communist), especially as seen in later sections of this collection. This structure is tripartite: "In the first part there is a class struggle in which the poor are identified as the oppressed. In the second part the people unite in their struggle and resist. The third and final part... implies a rebirth, a future, and a hope of a people united" (60). Suffering on the part of the indigenous peoples of Latin America is paramount, then, for two principal reasons: to make the reader socially aware of the troubled history of Latin America and to give a fundamentally different perspective that

does not conform to the traditional glorification of the *conquistadores*; and, to use this very history as a period leading up to a potential time in which there may no longer be suffering or oppression.⁵ Given the time during which this poetry was written, it should also be noted that Neruda bases many of his pronouncements on the invading Spanish on ideas and images associated with the entire *Leyenda negra* and the historical record passed down from Fray Bartolomé de las Casas' *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* and other chronicles. Neruda's view of civilizations dates back centuries to the very beginning of this Black Legend and receives an updated treatment here; indeed, the mark left by Las Casas' seminal chronicle is indelible (Concha 98). Villegas adds that Neruda also had the intention to "sing of the deepest roots of that which is [Latin] American, without temporal limitations and with a concept of history as a wider discourse consisting of cycles" (36; translation mine).⁶ In general, *Los conquistadores* maintains the pattern of intense suffering followed by resistance, thus allowing the possibility of peace and justice to exist again in the future, at the same time that it maintains a polarized stance on Pre-Columbian and Western civilizations.⁷

In *Los conquistadores*, the suffering of native Latin Americans is described in terms of corruption, rape, and dismemberment, brought about by the conquering Spaniards and imposed upon the

⁵ There have been a number of studies devoted to what many perceive as utopian strains in Neruda's work, both in the *Canto general* and in other collections. This utopianism would include not only the notion of a peaceful future time (rooted largely in Neruda's Marxist vision of a just and classless society) but also that of an equally peaceful time in the Pre-Columbian past of Latin America. Neruda's utopian views are another facet of the remythologized account of Latin American history which is woven into the *Canto general*. For an examination of Neruda's utopian tendencies, see, for example, Bellini, Mascia, Mereles Olivera, and Niebylski.

⁶ "Cantar las raíces más profundas de lo americano, sin limitaciones temporales y con una concepción de la historia como un amplio discurso constituido por ciclos."

⁷ It should be noted, however, that Neruda's condemnation of Western Civilization here is essentially limited to Spain, and does not take into account the abuses and excesses committed by similar European powers throughout history, such as the French or the Dutch, as Emir Rodríguez Monegal has observed (238). In addition, as this section will show, Neruda chooses not to condemn any of the cultural or religious practices that today would be considered grotesque human rights violations which were common to cultures such as the Aztecs, Mayans, or Incas.

It should also be added that the Black Legend mentioned above was used largely by these other European powers to condemn Spanish imperial activity during the Conquest and to discredit Spain as a rival power. Thus, Neruda's remythologizing rests in part on the ideas handed down by authors such as Las Casas and by other antagonistic European societies, and not by most traditional Spanish historiography.

uncorrupted soil of Latin America's original inhabitants. Almost immediately, Neruda finds his revision of Latin American history based on these visceral descriptions. This is seen very early in the section, for instance in "Ahora es Cuba," which portrays the natural environment as a living body. Cuba is treated as a woman who is raped and further dismembered:

Cuba, mi amor, te amarraron al potro,
te cortaron la cara,
te apartaron las piernas de oro pálido,
te rompieron el sexo de granada,
te atravesaron con cuchillos,
te dividieron, te quemaron. (Neruda 42)

For the poet, Cuba is a previously inviolate land whose most vital and private aspects, such as the "oro pálido" and the "sexo de granada" mentioned above, are overtaken and stolen by the pillaging Spaniards. There are similar stages of destruction throughout the poem, especially in the first line, which immediately sets a negative tone for the rest of the poem: "Y luego fue la sangre y la ceniza" (41). The land is portrayed as not even having had time to defend itself against an onslaught of invaders. As Frank Riess observes, "The image of division of a body is continued in terms of the robbing of life, and the rape of a woman. This last image is consistent with the equation of the form of the continent with the female form" (115, 116). This extreme trauma implied in the clash between two very different societies immediately suggests Neruda's stance, and begins the reconfiguration of the standard myth of the *conquistadores* mentioned earlier. More particularly, this traumatic encounter objectifies indigenous Latin America as a sexually violated female body (Mereles Olivera 58).

After the suffering of the native Caribs in their Pre-Columbian Arcadia—in "los valles de la dulzura" and in "la niebla" (42)—what remains is a profound sense of desolation and despair. This incredible sense of loss can be seen in the last section of the poem, in which Neruda likens the island not only to a female body but also specifically to his object of affection:

Cuba, mi amor, qué escalofrío
te sacudió de espuma a espuma,
hasta que te hiciste pureza,
soledad, silencio, espesura,
y los huesitos de tus hijos
se disputaron los cangrejos. (42)

The very bones of the natives, as the last line suggests, are picked at by the crabs, amidst silence and loneliness. This disaster and its resultant desolation will form one early part in a long line of similar incidents, all of which might easily be considered examples of cultural

genocide. Villegas' opinion regarding the rape and subsequent dismemberment of Cuba is not unlike that of Riess; Cuba is like

una doncella forzada en la cual se aplica la máxima violencia... Las imágenes apuntan a la crueldad, al destacar no sólo su violación sino también el descuartizamiento final. La escena nos recuerda el sacrificio de las doncellas cristianas. (189)

The conquerors leave nothing behind in their wake, not even living captives, as Neruda characterizes them as "exterminadores" (42). Extermination is not only a physical or biological phenomenon but also a cultural one as well.

Consequently, the Spanish are consistently looked upon as not only rapists of the land which they conquer but also as greedy men fixed on taking advantage of the land, despite the staggering human cost on the part of the natives. Various poems after the preceding one illustrate this point. For example, in "Cortés," the Spanish are portrayed as betraying the very hands that welcomed them, in search of gold and power:

Cortés recibe una paloma,
recibe un faisán, una cítara
de los músicos del monarca,
pero quiere la cámara del oro,
quiere otro paso, y todo cae
en las arcas de los voraces.
El rey se asoma a los balcones:
«Es mi hermano», dice. Las piedras
del pueblo vuelan contestando,
y Cortés afila puñales
sobre los besos traicionados. (44)

The Spanish, led by Hernán Cortés, are not considered historical heroes by the poet; instead, they are harbingers of death and destruction, again all in the interests of gold. The idea that this same conquest was achieved through the familiar theme of betrayal is also present in "Cholula," which describes some of the actions of the Spanish towards generous native people as such: "Entraron matando a caballo, / cortaron la mano que daba / el homenaje de oro y flores" (45). A consistent pattern of not only death and greedy rapaciousness, but also betrayal as the cause of such a pattern, emerges. Meanwhile, Alvarado, another traditionally glorified *conquistador*, receives a similar treatment in a poem by the same name. Neruda metaphorizes this historical figure as a civilization-destroying bird of prey:

Alvarado, con garras y cuchillos
cayó sobre las chozas, arrasó
el patrimonio del orfebre,
raptó la rosa nupcial de la tribu,
agredió razas, predios, religiones,

fue la caja caudal de los ladrones,
el halcón clandestino de la muerte.

The reference to Alvarado as a dishonorable person (or symbolic animal, in this instance) acting against "razas, predios, religiones" further highlights the poet's stance regarding Spanish and indigenous cultures. Instead of founding a moral and just civilization on new shores, the Spanish are shown to represent the most corrupt and depraved elements of humanity. This retelling of history also militates against centuries of the intentional relegation of native Latin American societies to oblivion, as Martha Campobello observes: "La función social de la literatura aquí es, no sólo rescatar del olvido, sino también, mostrar que el discurso oficial, la ideología dominante—que históricamente ha sido la del conquistador—promueve el olvido" (70).

Various other poems continue to treat the deeds of other conquerors in equally vivid detail, and at times focus on both laymen and clergy. "Cita de cuervos" combines both secular and religious historical figures, without differentiating the positions of the arriving Spaniards:

Primero llegó Almagro antiguo y tuerto,
Pizarro, el mayoral porcino
y el fraile Luque, canónigo entendido
en tinieblas. Cada uno
escondía el puñal para la espalda
del asociado, cada uno
con mugrienta mirada en las oscuras
paredes adivinaba sangre,
y el oro del lejano imperio los atraía
como la luna a las piedras malditas. (51, 52)

All were infused with materialism, and all are presented as avaricious men. Similarly, in "La línea colorada," the once-proud Inca Empire succumbs to this same rapaciousness on the part of the Spaniards, who are characterized as "los bandidos" and who require the natives to hand in all their gold, as "Tres cámaras / había que llenar de oro y de plata" (53). All of the gold that the natives possessed is taken, rupturing the economy of Inca civilization and violating its cultural norms regarding ownership and property:

Arañaron la tierra, descolgaron
alhajas hechas con amor y espuma,
arrancaron la ajorca de la novia,
desampararon a sus dioses.
El labrador entregó su medalla,
el pescador su bota de oro (54).

It is significant to note here that not only are the Spanish seen as

thieves, but also the Incas are characterized as ordinary, uncorrupted workers ("labrador" and "pescador")—a subtle reference to Neruda's Marxist tendencies. Additionally, in "Se entierran las lanzas," the land of Chile is first conquered and divided by the Spanish as though it were a slaughtered animal ("cortada fue la tierra / por los invasores cuchillos") and later settled by what Neruda considers money-oriented Basques: "Después vinieron a poblar la herencia / usureros de Euskadi, nietos / de Loyola" (62, 63). As Agosin recapitulates, Neruda sees the *conquistadores* "as agents of evil and presents them in a consistently negative form" (69). Betrayal, immorality, and conquest all have an economic facet as well, and are presented here in an intentionally anti-European context (Díez 20).

Just as the Spanish betrayed the earth which they conquered and later settled, the native Latin Americans maintained a stable order which was based largely upon respect for the land. This notion creates an opposition scenario in which the world imposed by the *conquistadores*, who do not rightfully own the land they now live on and who have been consistently portrayed as violent and covetous, contrasts with the established, peaceful civilization of the Indians. As María Rosa Olivera-Williams notes, the Spanish are, in this respect, not of the natural world: "[n]o 'pertenecen' a la naturaleza y tampoco pueden relacionarse con ella. No tienen fundamento ni raíces. Su vocación, su necesidad casi, es el aniquilamiento" (136). One sees Neruda's remythologized notion of "Duerme un soldado," in which the ordered and harmonious cosmos of the natives continues despite the presence of a sleeping Spanish soldier. This world includes elements of

... la harina
de la fertilidad y luego el orden,
el orden de la planta y de la secta,
la elevación de las rocas cortadas,
el humo de las lámparas rituales,
la firmeza del suelo para el hombre,
el establecimiento de las tribus,
el tribunal de los dioses terrestres. (49)

The earth is the metaphorical mother of all life, from which indigenous civilization springs. With this characterization of the world as a female body and of the natives as physically autochthonous, Neruda addresses himself to the earth in "Elegía": "Te hablo dormido, llamando / de tierra a tierra, madre / peruana, matriz cordillera" (55). The earth provides the womb from which the indigenous emerged, thus enabling them to establish a peaceful social order which is mindful of this land. The indigenous world is thus not only organized and based on respect, but also one which provides the reader an insight

into the autochthonous nature of humankind.⁸ Once again, however, this very order is constantly challenged, and usually usurped, by the Spanish, as can be observed from the question posed by the poet immediately following the quote mentioned above: "Cómo entró en tu arenal recinto / la avalancha de los puñales?" (55). The opposition scenario between the conquering ethic of the Spaniards and the naturalistic, just ethic of the natives is maintained. Riess emphasizes a similar idea, noting that

[t]hose who seek to take away the land from the *pueblo* and divide it up amongst themselves are compared to men who rape a woman, whilst *pueblo* and its heroes or *libertadores* are in a continual and intimate relationship with the earth, which is compared to normal and fruitful sexual relations... This relationship between *pueblo* and *tierra* as a normal, fruitful sexual intercourse, with the consent of the woman, contrasts as it were with the senseless, violent possession of the earth by the *conquistador*, the colonialist, the imperialist, and the oligarchy. (116)

In addition to its economic, moral, and political aspects, Neruda's reinvention of history includes a land and people which are sexualized and granted bodily characteristics. This bipolar historical reinvention is omnipresent throughout the entire collection:

La bipolaridad cultural española/imperialista contra la naturaleza americana atraviesa el libro trazando dos isotopías con valores opuestos: hay una fuerte carga axiológica negativa para la primera, y una exaltación positiva, para la segunda con hincapié en los elementos típicamente americanos, la naturaleza y el artesano laborioso. (Campobello 73)

Los conquistadores adds further criticism for the religious institutions brought over by the Spaniards as well. The men of the Catholic faith that arrived in Latin America for the first time are seen as often just as culpable as the secular Spanish colonizers. In examples such as these, clergymen did not always stop the brutality visited upon the Indians and, in fact, often had ulterior motives of their own. "Vienen por las islas (1493)" illustrates this point:

Sólo quedaban huesos
rígidamente colocados
en forma de cruz, para mayor
gloria de Dios y de los hombres....

Aquí la cruz, aquí el rosario,
aquí la Virgen del Garrote. (41)

⁸ Even the poetry itself can be considered "autochthonous" or rooted in nature, as Yurkiévich suggests: "la poesía es una emanación de la naturaleza... Hunde sus raíces en la tierra, sobre todo la natal, de donde extrae su sustancia nutricia; de ella proviene la inspiración significativa, la energía que se transformará en canto" (117).

Once the secular *conquistadores* were done with their task of exterminating the inhabitants of Guanahaní, the priests were content with erecting their religious symbols—brought to those shores through the very efforts at exterminating the native population. Later, in “Las agonías,” Peruvian natives die under the yoke of both the cross and the sword, led by Pizarro, thereafter to be characterized as “cerdo cruel de Extremadura”: “Diez mil peruanos caen / bajo cruces y espadas, la sangre / moja las vestiduras de Atahualpa” (53). Earlier in the poem, the priest Valverde is responsible for the initial violence brought upon Atahualpa and his men:

El capellán
Valverde, corazón traidor, chacal podrido,
adelanta un extraño objeto, un trozo
de cesto, un fruto
tal vez de aquel planeta
de donde vienen los caballos.
Atahualpa lo toma. No conoce
de qué se trata: no brilla, no suena,
y lo deja caer sonriendo.

«Muerte,
venganza, matad, que os absuelvo»,
grita el chacal de la cruz asesina. (53)

For the mere reason that Atahualpa did not know what the Bible was, and since Valverde could not understand Atahualpa's reaction, an essentially church-sanctioned slaughter ensued. Instead of being a symbol of love and morality, the cross has become a symbol of destruction in Neruda's iconography. Rather than advocating justice, the priests and friars come to represent conquest as much as soldiers do, for their sanctioning of oppression and for their motives of converting the native people at any cost. Neruda's criticism spares no one, as all members of Spanish society share the blame for the violence imported to America. Perhaps the most graphic example of the clergy's culpability can be seen in the sentence that Neruda has the Friar Luque utter to his *conquistador* companions, Almagro and Pizarro, when breaking the Host in “Cita de cuervos”:

«Dios ha sido dividido, hermanos,
entre nosotros», sostuvo el canónigo,
y los carniceros de dientes
morados dijeron «Amén». (52)

This time, the man of the cloth intends to take part in the spoils of conquest, as his motives are guided by materialism and domination no less than those of the men of the sword. Not once are the native

cultures of Latin America shown to be guided by the same motivations. Instead, the "Indian [sic] is the genuine offspring of Nature, the son of America; this authentic, indigenous, natural man is contrasted always with the inauthentic, artificial man of wigs and clothing, the rapacious invader, the *conquistador*." (Durán and Safir 88)

The turning point in this section of *Canto general* occurs with Neruda's call to arms, as the various native tribes begin to fight the invading Spaniards. One of the first examples of Neruda's injunction to the Native Americans to defend themselves is "Ximénez de Quesada (1536)." At first, the bellicose images of the arriving Spaniards prevail; immediately thereafter, however, the call to repulse the invaders appears, invoking nature to complete this task:

Ya van, ya van, ya llegan,
corazón mío, mira las naves,
las naves por el Magdalena,
las naves de Gonzalo Jiménez
ya llegan, ya llegan las naves,
deténlas, río, cierra
tus márgenes devoradoras,
sumérgelas en tu latido (50).

The forces of nature ally with the indigenous in order to stop the Spaniards; here, the poet enters a plea for the victory of nature over artificial constructions (the Spanish ships, in this instance). Later in the poem, Neruda openly cries for the land to defend itself as well as its honor and native traditions:

Ya entraron en la floresta:
ya roban, ya muerden, ya matan.
Oh Colombia! Defiende el velo
de tu secreta selva roja.

Ya levantaron el cuchillo
sobre el oratorio de Iraka,
ahora agarran al zipa,
ahora lo amarran. (51)

The forces of nature contained in this land may be considered destructive, as the first passage cited from this poem suggests, since there is a clear injunction to utterly destroy the invading Spanish fleet. However, such forces unleash their violence in a purely defensive role, and hence a justifiable one according to the polarized view of history that the poet constructs. Villegas elaborates this: "el yo poético apela a los elementos demoníacos para que colaboren en defensa. Es una especie de exorcismo, que recuerda poemas de Federico García Lorca" (207). The natural world of Pre-Columbian Latin America, along with its inhabitants, are not passive in this re-mythologized history.

In other instances throughout this poeticized history as well, Neruda identifies himself with the natives and their land. Various key phrases throughout *Los conquistadores* illustrate this point. In the poem cited above, for example, Neruda identifies the original land of Colombia as "mi patria verde y desnuda" (51), denoting a sense of brotherhood not only with the natives but also with their forest-covered, untamed land. Similarly, he identifies with the suffering of the Incas, in "Las agonías," as he declares that "Nuestra sangre en su cuna es derramada" (53), while in "Cholula," Neruda speaks of the overwhelmed natives in familial terms, as "mis hermanos sorprendidos" (45). In "Elegía," although there is a sense of bewilderment on the poetic subject's part, Neruda also declares that he, too, has the same mythologized roots as the very people who suffered there under the Spanish yoke centuries ago, in declaring, "Estoy hecho de tus raíces" (55). Although Neruda was Chilean by citizenship and Hispanic in ancestry (and, more precisely, Basque), he identifies with all of the oppressed peoples in Latin America's conquest, since all can be said to belong to one common group, the *pueblo*.⁹ In addition, since Neruda's poetic subject identifies with the land as well as with the people who live on it, the poetic subject takes on somewhat of an autochthonous character himself. Emir Rodríguez Monegal portrays Neruda as precisely this: "el narrador que se levanta desde la arena nutricia y el océano para cantar la gloria y la miseria de la América hispánica" (19-20). This identification of Neruda with native Latin Americans and with the *pueblo* in general presents a remythologized historical rendering that is both individual (as it speaks to his own "autochthonous" roots) and collective (as it treats history as a whole). As Yurkiévich indicates globally regarding Neruda's poetry,

El pueblo se convierte para Neruda en el fundamento significativo de toda poesía. Lo concibe como una prolongación de la naturaleza genésica dotado de todas las potestades de la potencia que lo engendra; tendrá los mismos atributos energéticos, la misma capacidad generadora y transformadora que la tierra madre. Para Neruda, la calidad, la cantidad, la intensidad del ser, la consistencia ontológica están siempre en proporción directa con el vínculo natural: a mayor contacto con la naturaleza, más entidad. Todo se refiere en última instancia a la naturaleza, hasta lo político. (125)

⁹ It can also rightfully be said that Neruda fantasizes about being of indigenous origin, as Gordon Brotherston has noted: "He shares too that compensatory fantasy of an Indian [sic] father nobler and more potent than relentlessly effective European fecundators of the American womb" (127). This fantasy attempts to remove association with the European ancestors who committed the atrocities detailed in the *Canto general*.

The poet also expresses deep sentiment for the defense of his own country, Chile, against the invading Spanish *conquistadores* in "La tierra combatiente." All of the natural elements unite their strength in defending the primordial land of Chile, known here as Arauco. The first line of the poem sets the tone of the earth's tenacity against the intruders: "Primero resistió la tierra" (58). This *tierra* then is broken down into its various elements, all of which prove effective in halting the advancing Spaniards. The first of these elements is the snow: "La nieve araucana quemó / como una hoguera de blancura / el paso de los invasores" (58). It is interesting to note the antithetical pairing of words in this passage, as the "nieve" is compared to an "hoguera." The air is the next line of defense for Chile: "El aire chileno azotaba / marcando estrellas, derribando / codicias y caballerías" (58). Then, the destructive force of hunger sets its desolating effects upon the Spanish troops and their horses:

Luego el hambre caminó
de Almagro como una invisible
mandíbula que golpeaba.
Los caballos eran comidos
en aquella fiesta glacial. (58)

Finally, death takes its toll upon the *conquistadores*, as "la muerte del Sur" and "la muerte del Norte" (58) combine, not unlike a pincers-manuever in battle, to surprise and defeat the Spanish.¹⁰ Neruda's mythical homeland, his *patria*, is described as a living organism whose natural elements were weapons which rightfully laid waste to Almagro and his men.

Through this notion of defense of the land, the *patria* is born. This *patria*, however, is not only described in terms of military defense, as once again Neruda employs imagery of a human figure in presenting it. "Descubridores de Chile" illustrates this:

Noche, nieve y arena hacen la forma
de mi delgada patria,
todo el silencio está en su larga línea,
toda la espuma sale de su barba marina,
todo el carbón la llena de misteriosos
besos.

¹⁰ Neruda's treatment of Latin American history is not the only instance in which different societies have used nature as a metaphor for national self-defense or historical remembrance. For example, Russian society has often glorified its defeats over France in the War of 1812 and over Germany in World War II as instances in which the winter proved to be one of the principal elements in its successful defense against its invading enemies. Similarly, Japanese culture had long considered the destruction of invading Mongol fleets during its medieval period as due to the "divine wind" or *kamikaze*.

Como una brasa el oro arde en sus dedos
y la plata ilumina como una luna verde
su endurecida forma de tétrico planeta. (57)

The use of human anatomical imagery in describing Chile leads the reader to believe that it possesses an *animus* of its own. This *animus* is also what exercised the land's natural prowess in holding back and in vanquishing the band of men led by Almagro. At the end of this poem, the reader notes again the polarized opposition between the world of the Spaniard and the world of the native—specifically, the unspoiled world of the Araucanos, as seen for the first time by European eyes—as the Spaniard is confronted with a strange, powerful land in which he had never imagined he would be:

El español sentado junto a la rosa un
día,
junto al aceite, junto al vino, junto al
antiguo cielo,
no imaginó este punto de colérica piedra
nacer bajo el estiércol del águila marina. (58)

Chile's early life is not the same as the Spanish world, and it is this cold, rocky land that gave birth to the Araucanos with which Neruda sides in this poem.

Perhaps the greatest occasion in which the reader observes the forging of the *patria* can be seen in two poems describing its fight against the Spanish: "Se unen la tierra y el hombre" and "Valdivia (1544)." The first of these two poems contains numerous natural images which detail the birth of the homeland and the people who are born from it. Once again, this homeland is forged through its self-defense. The word *Patria* (which is capitalized throughout the poem) is the entity which expresses the unity between humankind and the land. More precisely, it expresses the unity of the Araucanos with their land, and the intimate and autochthonous relationship between the two, as the Araucanos were simple in dress and were made of the stuff of the earth:

No tuvieron mis padres araucanos
cimeras de plumaje luminoso,
no descansaron en flores nupciales,
no hilaron oro para el sacerdote;
eran piedra y árbol, raíces
de los breñales sacudidos,
hojas con forma de lanza,
cabezas de metal guerrero. (59)

Not only do people and the land assume common characteristics, but also they assume the characteristics of soldiers and weapons, as they are threatened by the encroaching Spaniards. Their attempt

at defense is what led to the birth of the *patria*, as Neruda cites at the end of the poem: "Así nació la patria unánime: / la unidad antes del combate" (60). Once again, however, it must be noted that a fruitful relationship between people and land can only occur when the former respect the latter and understand that they came from it. For this reason, Neruda considers the Araucanos as the rightful inheritors of the original Chile, whereas the invading Spanish armies and colonists came to possess the land with ideas of outright individual ownership instead of mutual symbiosis. Riess notes these ideas, stating that the

birth of *patria* only comes about when the men who inhabit a landscape take on a particular attitude towards each other and towards their environment. They must unite their common individual existences into a whole which is larger than the sum of their own particular lives. This is also an attitude which has to be based on an appreciation of their environment unadorned by religious cults or social fears, which pervert the truly natural or social existence. (101)

Humanity's autochthonous nature is highlighted by the fact that it is forced to defend the land from which it is born, as well as by much of the imagery which this poem employs. The various natural elements unite to create the *patria*, which are further used to identify the Araucanos. Neruda makes use of images such as air, rain, rocks, trees, and the shifting of daylight and darkness to accentuate what he believes to be the nature of the natives and their land. The following selections of "Se unen la tierra y el hombre" illustrate this:

Se hicieron sombra los padres de piedra,
se anudaron al bosque, a las tinieblas
naturales, se hicieron luz de hielo,
asperezas de tierras y de espinas...

Patria, nave de nieve,
follaje endurecido:
allí naciste, cuando el hombre tuyo
pidió a la tierra su estandarte
y cuando tierra y aire y piedra y lluvia,
hoja, raíz, perfume, aullido,
cubrieron como un manto al hijo,
lo amaron o lo defendieron. (59, 60)

The last noun in this selection, *hijo*, refers to the *patria* itself. Just as a child is born from the union of a man and a woman, the *patria* is born from the union between humankind and the land. Since people are a vital part of the *patria*, their origins are reverted back to the land, and the reader is left with a view of people now as entities with telluric or autochthonous origins as well as sexual ones. Nelly Santos observes this association: "Naturaleza y aborígen son el binomio hombre-tierra profundamente identificados" (234). All of the images which Neruda

uses to describe this *patria* are taken directly from nature, and are not yet cluttered by the trappings of "civilization" imported from Europe. The natural order and the social order approximate one another and, in fact, become one another as the *patria* is born and defended. In addition, Neruda feels a kinship with Araucano society, since it lived in harmony with nature and maintained its healthy relationship with it; as a result he refers to the Aracuanos as his "padres" (59) throughout the poem.

Many of these ideas continue to the following poem, "Valdivia" (1544). Here, the Araucanos continue to defend the land from which they were born while they start to suffer under Spanish domination. Neruda begins by condemning the efforts of Spaniards to divide land which is not theirs and to treat it as though it were property and not a living organism:

Valdivia, el capitán intruso,
cortó mi tierra con la espada
entre ladrones: «Esto es tuyo,
esto es tuyo Valdés, Montero,
esto es tuyo Inés, este sitio
es el cabildo.»
Dividieron mi patria
como si fuera un asno muerto. (60)

Arauco is born amidst mass suffering which is described in disturbing terms: "Así empezó la sangre, / la sangre de tres siglos, la sangre océano, / la sangre atmósfera que cubrió mi tierra" (60). In this manner, Neruda creates an alternative "memory" or rendering of history in which the approximately three centuries of colonization are now seen as destructive and anti-civilizing, instead of constructive and glorious. The blood of the Araucanos shed in defense of their land becomes infused with the land, the sea, and the air; Arauco's vital essence is spilled in its defense. The *patria*'s defensive war begins:

Pero aquí la unidad sombría
de árbol y piedra, lanza y rostro,
trasmitió el crimen en el viento.
Lo supo el árbol fronterizo,
el pescador, el rey, el mago,
lo supo el labrador antártico,
lo supieron las aguas madres
del Bío-Bío.
Así nació la Guerra patria. (61)

Though Valdivia does succeed in bleeding Arauco into submission, the importance of humanity's relationship to the land and of the forging of the *patria* is not diminished. Though the suffering in this poem is quite intense and though its portrayal is gruesome—as the line, "Valdivia entró la lanza goteante / en las entrañas pedregosas / de

Arauco" (61) suggests—the unity of Arauco is maintained, in spite of being persecuted. Not only are the Araucanos related to their primeval Chile, they *are* Chile.¹¹ Thus, Neruda mythologizes his individual homeland as a violated living body along with himself and the rest of Latin America as a whole.

Finally, the last poem of *Los conquistadores*, "A pesar de la ira," is somewhat unique in that it contains an element of hope and closes the section on a positive note. It also confirms the structure of the section and of the rest of *Canto general*, in that the hope for a more positive future, after periods of oppression and violence have passed, is articulated. This new positive tone is apparent from the beginning of the poem, as the prospect of a new and just social order is shown:

Pero a través del fuego y la herradura
como de un manantial iluminado
por la sangre sombría,
con el metal hundido en el tormento
se derramó una luz sobre la tierra:
número, nombre, línea y estructura. (67)

The arrival of various cultures, as seen in the phrase "claro poderío / de idiomas rumorosos" (67), forms the foundation of modern Chile, along with industry and commerce. These additions present something of a change in the view of "civilization" present in *Los conquistadores*, as contemporary Chile is not necessarily seen as an utterly dystopian wasteland following its ancestral Arauco, but rather as a dynamic, thriving new culture. The final lines of the poem illustrate hope and renewal the most clearly:

Así, con el sangriento
titán de piedra,
halcón encarnizado,
no sólo llegó sangre sino trigo.

La luz vino a pesar de los puñales. (68)

An interesting opposition is contained in this passage, in which evil and violence, as symbolized by "sangre" and "puñales," are opposed to redemption, growth, and knowledge, symbolized by "trigo" and "luz." Villegas concludes by observing that "Por lo tanto, pese al tono opresivo, indignado y violento dominante en la sección, ésta concluye con un signo de optimismo" (56). The unity of all people, Spanish and indigenous, is forged, and a new, integrated social

¹¹ Olivera-Williams refers to the image of the Araucano presented here as an "hombre-naturaleza" (142) who derives strength and protection from the land, noting the symbiosis between humanity and the earth which Neruda weaves into his work.

structure is implied—even after the violent clash of opposing cultures in the initial age of the Conquest. This structure resembles the various elements of the earth, as the images of “Páginas de agua,” “racimos,” and “fulgor nevado” (67) demonstrate. Riess observes this phenomenon:

The emergence and growth of this structure are like the bubbling of water, the spreading of light, or the unfolding of a plant or a tree, which derive their nourishment from the soil; and like the image of the tree it opens out to reveal its autonomous organization and structure... There has been a movement in this poem from order of events to a structural order, from disorder to order, from death to life. (24, 25)

Los conquistadores closes with Neruda's belief that a new society can take shape, even with his poeticized view of history and human suffering. Neruda's vision maintains the structure intended for this section and for the *Canto*, along with its tone of optimism.

In conclusion, in *Los conquistadores* as in much of the *Canto general*, Neruda was searching for himself when re-examining the history of his continent, and specifically its many instances of injustice. Neruda would achieve the end of vindicating himself and his people (indigenous Latin Americans, and eventually all Latin Americans by historical association) in writing *Los conquistadores*, since his constant aim is to give a voice to the various elements of the *pueblo*.¹² *Los conquistadores* allows Neruda this personal and social vindication through a reinvented myth (still based on historical events, naturally, and on their rendering dating back to colonial-era chronicles and the exaggerated legends they spawned) of different civilizations and their violent struggle.¹³ The vast instances of suffering seen here, however, are counterbalanced by efforts of the *pueblo* and the *patria* to defend themselves; and in such occasions of self-defense, humanity's true nature is revealed. Such nature is an autochthonous one, owing itself to the earth and in balance with the world and with one's fellows. If this balance is maintained, there is hope despite people's hardships.

¹² It must also be noted, however, that Neruda is not necessarily free of his own prejudices, namely traditional Latin *machismo*. Villegas is one of relatively few scholars who have studied this phenomenon in the *Canto general*, noting that women are seen too often to occupy a secondary and passive role in the recounting of Latin American history and in Neruda's hopes for a better future. See “Héroes y heroínas: El machismo del *Canto general*.”

¹³ In certain respects, of course, Neruda's vision can be considered simplistic in its obvious bipolarity, as Durán and Safir have observed (83). There have been instances, however, in the *Canto general* in which indigenous civilizations are not so overtly idealized, and may even be seen somewhat ambivalently for their shortcomings. For a more thorough examination of this ambiguous treatment, see Camayd-Freixas 283.

Upon discovering Neruda's message, the reader is left with "a sensual experience, a contact with the humidity of wood and rain, and a vision of the wild landscapes of his beloved country" (Agosin 136). These are some of the poetic effects that Neruda was trying to create in *Los conquistadores*, in addition to the effect of awakening the reader's consciousness to distinctly social and historical themes.¹⁴ *Los conquistadores* is a poetic essay on defeat and perseverance and on humanity's nature as complex and organic beings, at the same time that it remains a highly subjective treatise on the meaning of civilizations, history, and personal and cultural identity.

Mark Mascia
Sacred Heart University
Fairfield, Connecticut
United States of America

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¹⁴ There are additional interpretations regarding the notion that Neruda wanted to make the reader aware of the past. Politics—and particularly the politics set during the Cold War—play a role as well, as René de Costa has noted: "Granted for a moment the effectiveness, or rather the persuasiveness, of Neruda's revision of the continent's past history, the primary purpose of *Canto general* was not to educate the public concerning the evils of the past but to create a political consciousness in order to assess the present situation" (138).

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