La Indiá: The right to imagine
Mapuche Pop

Puelpan
Neo Lautaro

Peñi passenger of this journey
You know that there is life after death
And death after life
As those butterflies used to say
With the buzzing of their steely wings
Listening to IRON MAIDEN
(David Aníñir Guiltraro)

A utopia out of place

‘A utopia out of place’ was what my inner voice told me. Or perhaps it was the voice of others – both Chilean and Mapuche in unison – that haunted me like a ghostly shadow, while I programmed the beats of my own pop songs in front of the computer. Inherited from what came before me, the origin or nationality of the voice was ultimately not important. Wherever it came from, it was me. I had made it mine.

After several years of making music and taking part in projects of different musical styles, my career was entering a new phase. The need to leave a group for a solo project in which I could radicalise my musical ideas, from lyrics to sounds, seemed unavoidable. Previous experiences had led to the incorporation into my musical imaginary of two elements which, although at different levels, had proved crucial for the creation of new sounds that would bear witness to the life processes I had been going through in recent years. First, I felt I needed to engage, through my work, with a politicised vision of reality: this implied tracing and capturing the steps on the path towards the recovery of my Mapuche identity, which I had undertaken years before. Second, after varied musical practices, I was convinced of the need to materialise my ideas (and feelings) into a single format that would allow me to frictionlessly incorporate the multiple influences and styles that had marked my development as a musician. Thus, I chose as my vehicle one of the artistic expressions I was most familiar with; one that had been the object of my devotion since early childhood and even up to the present time. Here I am referring to, by far, the most seductive, capitalist and neoliberal (almost always banal and contrived) of all the musical genres on the face of the earth: pop.

Almost inevitably, the word ‘contradiction’ – in capital letters and with exclamation marks – came to my mind. However, it was not my wish to interfere with the flow of ideas or music, which, from my perspective, should always manifest itself as it comes. Other genres that have been linked to, or have been closer to, social demands and protest – such as hip hop or folklore – already have a place in the imaginary of popular Mapuche music. Rock, cumbia and ranchera have also played their part in this. However,
although these musical genres have also been imported and, in very broad terms, somehow participate in the spectrum labelled ‘pop culture’, both in terms of their staging and mechanisms of circulation and dissemination, it would be hard to relate the concept of ‘pop song’, simply put, to certain political and/or identity processes located on the fringes of the mainstream.

What is the work of a Mapuche musician or artist supposed to convey? What are the languages, formats and codes allowed to express one’s own identity? Who is the controlling, abstract entity that determines what is allowed and what is not? What should the musical or artistic work of a champurria – as the descendants of Chilean-Mapuche miscegenation are usually called, for better and for worse – be about? ‘Mismatches’ such as the ones just mentioned are what motivate the writing of this text.

**Recapitulations**

It is a fact that not all Mapuche, or Mapuche-champurria, who have been born and lived most of their lives in the city of Santiago, far from their territory of origin or Wallmapu, have the same shared experiences of their mapuchidad, and neither have their experiences shaped their identity in the same way. While some have maintained contact with aspects of Mapuche tradition and culture, as well as with the Mapuzugun language, others have experienced their origin as a nebulous reality, blurred, and in some cases, omitted or denied as a result of a colonial wound passed down from generation to generation. My particular case is the latter.

‘Mamita Blanca doesn’t want to speak Mapuzugun’, I heard people say in passing at one family gathering or another during my childhood and adolescence. Sometimes, stories were told. They talked about Rucaco, the area near San José de La Mariquina, located in what is now called the Los Ríos Region, where my maternal grandmother, Blanca Puelpan Huaiquimilla, was born and raised. From there, when she was very young, she moved to San José de La Mariquina, where she worked as a dressmaker, and met my grandfather Floridor García Obando, whom she later married. Her deepest aspiration was to study to become a teacher, she once told me, but this seemed far out of her reach at the time and she could not realise her dream. However, this did not limit her creative expression. Throughout her eighty-seven years of life, in countless notebooks, many of which are now lost, her ideas about the world surrounding her were recorded in the form of poems and song lyrics she composed with a guitar. Many years later, having raised four children, my grandparents, along with part of the family, moved to the Metropolitan Region, settling in the municipality of
San Bernardo. I was born in the 1980s, in the middle of the varia and also the civil-military dictatorship, the only child of my mother, Marila García Puelpan, who raised me with a lot of love and toil. Of my childhood memories, very few lead me to any substantial event that led me to identify myself as Mapuche. Rather, I retain in my memory unconnected episodes and fragmented associations which, it seems, have articulated a kind of unconscious narrative that, over time, gave rise to a sense of belonging or, at least, of coming to belong.

In recollecting, voices and visions follow one after the other, with no apparent order or meaning. I remember, at around the age of 10, going with my mother and uncles to visit family friends who lived in Maquillahue, near the seaside at Mehuín in the Los Ríos Region. That time we were received with great hospitality and Don Santos Cañulaf, the grandfather of the family, talked to us for long hours. His eldest son, Rubén Cañulaf then did the same. Each one summed up practically their entire biography in their respective stories. As a child, I was not bored. I felt that time passed differently and I thought to myself, ‘How different the Mapuche are. They are very relaxed and take their time to do things.’ That night we stayed in one of the family’s rukas. I remember overhearing the adults talking about how my uncle Gonzalo, who had never left the south, had kept the ‘legendary’ pieces of traditional Mapuche silver jewellery worn by my great-grandmother, María Huaiquimilla Lefno, and had given them to one of her daughters. I remember my aunt Gloria commenting on her experience of having participated in more than one gillatun. I recall my mother telling me the story of when she was 8 years old and her aunt, my grandfather Floridor’s sister, had chased her on horseback through the streets of San José de La Mariquina, shouting, ‘India, india, india!’, a generational insult inherited from mother to daughter. I remember my father, in his visits during my childhood, asking me about my maternal family with his particular sense of humour and typical joke of ‘How is the tribe?’

Things like these, ranging from anecdotal to sad and, at times, absurd, are what I recall from that first phase of my life. However, the one thing I remember above all others is the silence of my grandmother, the unshakeable silence of Mamita Blanca. There was never a way to get a single word out of her about her Mapuche origin and identity, nor was it possible to get a word out of her in the Mapuzugun she knew so well. It was not until I entered university to study musical education at the age of 18 that I gradually began the process of re-encountering my own Mapuche heritage, which I felt reaffirmed by how, at the School of Pedagogy, I made friends with other Mapuche who also recognised me as such and began to call me lamgen.
Of screens and glittering sequins

While I was denied access to my own Mapuche identity during my early years, there was another universe that was, like to most children born in the 1980s, completely accessible to me: image culture and the alienation of television. The investment in everything related to the entertainment industry by Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship during this decade, in particular, was colossal. Television undoubtedly had a very important role to play as a smokescreen to distract from, and mask, the brutality and cruelty that marked this period in Chile’s history.

They were the glory days of stardom. National and international stars followed one another in an endless parade, floating in glittering sequins adorned with huge shoulder pads, leonine hairstyles and an excess of ultra-dramatic make-up. The lavish display of scenic resources gave the spectacle an almost circus-like feel that entertained, captivated and bewitched the masses, especially the new generations who did not know the world before the omnipresence of screens. Music, in this context, appeared as a key piece on the chessboard. The pop song, with its catchy, short-lived melody, made its presence felt in people’s homes through radio and television. Regardless of context or place of origin, this style seemed to be able to take any influence, absorb it and return it as an appealing ‘universal’ product, extraordinarily cross-cutting and accessible to everyone.

As a child that was – and still is, as an adult – deeply impressionable and sensitive to both visual and sound stimuli, I remember being completely captivated by the songs and videos of these charismatic beings that appeared on my screen, wanting to become one of them myself. At the age of five, with no particular ideological or moral construct, I would indulge in long routines of practice in singing and dancing and imitating my idols before performing in front of a loyal audience of family members, neighbours and schoolmates. Of the steps traced on the path of memory, it may be that, over time, certain elements appear to us as simply a backdrop to, or decorative aspect, of the scenery, which, most of the time, is inhabited unconsciously. Nonetheless, I believe that to understand the power and conflicts that affect us, both personally and collectively, it is necessary to assume that we are not only daughters and sons of all of the mothers and fathers who came before us, but also, and no less importantly, we are daughters and sons of our times.

La Indiá

Eventually, almost five years after deciding to make a fundamental change to my artistic creation and after a long period of deep musical and existential readjustments, I recorded my first video clip. As if it were an initiatory
action, I decided to ‘designate’ myself Puelpan, taking as my new name and authorial signature for my compositions from that moment onwards the Mapuche surname of my maternal grandmother, in a gesture that seemed fair and necessary to me: not only because I do not approve of the fact that the Mapuche name has been erased from me, but also because the reason why this happened is that it is always the mother’s name that is erased through generations as a result of the patrilineal and patriarchal logic of descent imposed, in this case, by Chilean legislation.

In December 2018, the video of the song La Indiá my first creation under the name of Puelpan, was exhibited for the first time. It was screened at the art exhibition of Colectivo MapsUrbe, whose research aimed to delve, through an interdisciplinary exercise, into the multiple layers and complexities traversing urban Mapuche identities in the city of Santiago, seeking, at the same time, to unveil their reflexive and creative power.

The concept of ‘indiá’ or ‘indiada’, as the central axis from which the lyrics unfold, refers to an expression of Chilean popular jargon. It is charged with a pejorative connotation of irrational unruliness associated with ‘the Indians’ – that is, the Mapuche caricatured in the imaginary of Chilean folklore as inherently insurrectionary, choleric and bellicose characters – directed at those who revolt or disobey. The use of the word applies to any kind of collective or individual uprising by Mapuche or non-Mapuche, as well as to any sudden manifestation of anger or dissent. Finally, the term ‘indiá’ is also associated with an idea of collectivity, people, populace, plebs, mob. An extract from the lyrics of the song follows:

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\text{What is it that you are so afraid of? What is going to happen?}\n\text{If you cross the border, you put your feet in the river along with many others.}\n\text{Yes, our feathers rise in reaction. One has to know how to fight.}\n\text{The Death Star of order and progress doesn’t want to listen to you,}\n\text{Where force is the law, there is no time to cry, no time to choose}\n\text{There is no time to suffer, no time to fight,}\n\text{There is no time to sleep, no time to cry out.}\n\text{The apocalypse of St. John is already coming, and how will it find you?}\n\text{Struggling to be human or serving Satan?}\n\text{Maybe you’ve heard that making noise is wrong}\n\text{Maybe you’ve heard that ‘they have a bad case of the indiá’.}\n\]

Turning words upside down, subverting the meaning of ideas that have historically been used to belittle and subjugate us, disarticulating their purposes and altering the trajectory of language are all ways of interfering with reality to be able to create reality. Moreover, the operation of dislocating configurations and meanings of verbal language can be transferred to a process of transmutation and re-articulation of sound associations, since both music and all kinds of sound are also engraved within a symbolic framework.
As I pointed out earlier in my story, through the different phases I have gone through as a musician, I have always valued the multiplicity of forms that the pop song potentially contains. As a language that I have constantly sought to explore, I am also aware of the complexities involved in the creative process for this format and have admired the gift with which many authors and performers have mastered their art. Pop as a musical genre is, to me, a way to fluidly incorporate and reconfigure the different influences that have marked my own route as a musician. In the case of *La Indiá* it has been possible for me to articulate elements of Andean *tinku,* as well as electronic and punk music into a single track, thus converting this format into a tool that allows me to exercise subjectivity from the local context and my personal experience. This way, colonising and anaesthetising devices such as pop culture and music are transfigured into tools that open the way to a decolonising, politicised and lucid creative exercise that, in turn, allows one to generate their own and situated imaginaries through which to invoke other possible futures. On the other hand, the video clip as an audio-visual instrument is, without a doubt, one of the most iconic elements and a central piece of the pop machinery, since in the audio-visual capsule, all of the genre’s resources are synthesised. As such, due to its non-linear and arbitrary narrative structure, this format entails an incomparable potential when having resources to freely articulate representations from one’s own local and self-conscious perspective.

Directed by Rosario González, the video clip of *La Indiá* also constituted an exercise in experimentation with a collective dimension. Improvisation played a determining role in this through a spontaneous choreographic exercise carried out together with my *pu lamgen* from ‘Ninja Newen’, a Mapuche group of *waria che pu domo* who define themselves as ‘lof of the future’ and whose members at the time were Camila Huenchumil, Aylin Espinoza Chehuaicura, Mikal Neculqueo, Gianni Nahuelhual and myself. My friend Antonia Larenas and my friend and *lamgen* Antil also joined in on this kinetic and audio-visual experiment. A projector, a background wall, our bodies as a support for the light and Rosario’s intuitive eye were the only resources available at the time of filming. The projection of sequences of manipulated analogue tapes and the subsequent editing of the images were the elements from which the director constructed a visual narrative for the song. From a minimalist production, it was possible to generate a visuality inspired by pop references – cyberpunk, comics and *animé,* among others – but which, from the very way it is made to its discursive dimension,

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1 Andean ritual and original dance from the north of Potosí in Bolivia, also practised in areas of southern Peru and northern Chile. Since the late 1990s, it has been present in the city of Santiago as a distinctive element in marches, protests and social demonstrations.

2 Some of this material was provided by the Collective for Experimentation and Research in Film Formats CEIS8. Also included were tapes intervened by Rosario González.
is strongly committed politically, distancing itself completely from the motivations and clichés of global pop aesthetics.

FROM THE UNIVERSAL TO THE LOCAL

Regarding the initial questions concerning the apparent contradiction of using an emblematic manifestation of consumer society – in this case, the pop song – for exploration and expression in my identitarian claim, I think only time, through praxis, will be able to shed light on the power of formats with these characteristics. It is only by walking down this path that ways of transmuting ideas into possible realities will be revealed, which, in being socialised – through the collectivisation of creative processes, for example – will acquire renewed and relevant situated meanings. It is also necessary to consider the ‘nature’ of the reality we inhabit and not to ignore the fact that in the present there is an audio-visual dimension that inundates us and with which we interact permanently. Inevitably, participating in this virtual construction, our identities are permeated by the infinite elements contained therein, but we also feed it in turn. From Guy Debord to Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui – among others – it is nothing new to say that the colonising global culture is the culture of montage, artifice and spectacle. We could then say that culture is pop. It is the hallmark of our times. As if it were a holographic Trojan horse, the scope of its onslaught infiltrates painlessly into our individual and collective spaces, entering into direct relation with our daily lives. This is its greatest Machiavellianism and its greatest power.

Perhaps this is why, from the perspective of the weychan, it makes more sense to make pop instead of making ‘art’; perhaps we have already reached the point in which perpetuating these categories is not useful for the development and effective communication of ideas and emerging creative manifestations which seek to intervene, interfere with and transform reality. For this to happen, new practices and formats are needed.

I imagine a pop from the margins. I imagine a pop that, at the same time, is not pop. I imagine a champurria pop, ‘stained’ by the traces of colonial history, but original in its exploration of its own identity. I do not imagine a champurria pop as a slogan to indulge in an unaware, insubstantial and accommodating relativism. I do imagine a pop champurreado, politically and spiritually committed, unapologetically situated in the space–time it has been given to inhabit. Finally, I imagine a Mapuche champurria pop that does not aspire to move from the Mapuche to the universal but, on the contrary, traverses the global as a way to look at itself again, recognising what is its own in its making and in its different ways of manifesting itself. I believe that to imagine the future, projected in large or small utopias, is a form of resistance. And that what does not exist can be invented.