Repositioning the Popular: The Hybrid Aesthetics of Violeta Parra’s Paintings

*Machitún*, *Las tres Pascualas*, and *Casamiento de negros*

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, traditional practices and popular culture in Chile went into decline. The situation was compounded by the fact that in the plastic arts, there was already an established hierarchy in which art based on traditional culture and crafts (*artesanía*) occupied a subordinate position. The Chilean artist and folklorist Violeta Parra sought to disrupt this paradigm. In this article I explore the way Parra sought to defend popular culture through her visual art by creating paintings that were based on traditional culture but were also extremely modern. There is a paradox inherent in the modernism of Violeta Parra’s art and the way it sought to reposition popular culture. On the one hand, Parra’s work was indigenous. It counteracted the demise of traditional culture that was brought about by modernism. On the other hand, her work was utterly hybrid. Violeta Parra’s art enacted a revival of traditional culture through the fusion of a modernist aesthetics with motifs and narratives from Chilean popular culture. To explore the way Parra sought to redefine popular culture, I deconstruct the subjects and visual syntax of the paintings *Machitún*, *Las tres Pascualas*, and *Casamiento de negros*. I look at the resonance of her work, which arises from the popular subjects she presents and the way her work disrupts hierarchies in the field of cultural production.

In the twentieth century, an intense period of modernization led to the demise of popular culture in Latin America, and as Carolina Rocha and Cacilda Régo explain, the popular was disavowed as part of a strategy that entailed the rigid exclusion of the working class.¹ Concurrent with this decline, there was an international drive to preserve and perpetuate folk traditions, particularly folk music.² The Chilean artist Violeta Parra (1917–1967) was part of this movement. In 1953 Parra conducted research on Chilean
popular culture and recorded traditional songs. By “popular culture” I refer to the culture of the working class, or to use Ticio Escobar’s definition, “los sectores subalternos, ‘los de abajo’; los excluidos de poder, participación y representación plenos.” Parra’s intention was to create what Paula Miranda describes as a cultural and acoustic map. In 1955 Parra won one of the highest cultural awards in the country: the Association of Television, Radio and Cinema Critics (La Asociación de Cronistas de Teatro, Radio y Cine) awarded prizes called the Caupolicanes. Parra won the Caupolicán prize for the best folklorist of 1954. In 1958 she established a national museum of Chilean folklore at the Universidad de Concepción, and in 1964 she exhibited her own paintings, sculptures, and embroideries in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs of the Louvre gallery in Paris. This exhibition in a cultural space affiliated with the world’s most famous art gallery was the apogee of Parra’s artistic career. In her visual art, as in her music, poetry, and research, Parra vehemently tried to stem the demise of popular culture, particularly the disavowal of the popular that Rocha and Régo describe. Although this drive to champion the cultural sphere of the rural working class is manifest in all the mediums that Parra employed, it is particularly evident in her visual art.

In this article I explore Parra’s strategy for the regeneration of popular culture as it is manifest in her paintings. I focus on the paintings Las tres Pascualas (fig. 1), Casamiento de negros, and Machitún (fig. 2). I propose that Parra sought to reposition popular culture in the field of cultural production. In her early career Parra spoke of folk culture as something that remained unchanged. As she explained in an interview in 1954, “El folclor auténtico sigue siendo siempre igual y se le interpreta con la seriedad que corresponde.” Nonetheless, Parra went on to create art that was inspired by and rooted in popular culture, but in which other styles of creativity also flourished. Therefore, despite her vehement belief in the importance of authenticity, and despite some of her own early views, Parra’s ultimate strategy for the vindication of popular culture countered the notion that popular culture should remain untouched, fixed in form and temporality. While Parra developed a poetics that was rooted in fables, folk music, rituals, and other rural traditions from Chilean culture, she merged these forms with the aesthetics of high art, including subjects from popular culture. Through her oil paintings she brought the popular to a new cultural space: the international art gallery.

As well as exploring the way Parra’s inclusion of fables, traditions, and other motifs from rural culture reposition popular culture, I argue that Parra’s work was “indigenist.” Indigenism is a political and cultural movement that seeks to defend and venerate the culture of indigenous groups in Latin America. In general terms, indigenous work seeks to privilege precolonial or native culture in an attempt to counter the damaging effects of colonialism. In the twentieth century the movement influenced a variety of disciplines. With reference to indigenism in literature, José Carlos Mariátegui writes that it seeks to revive the autochthonous: “El indigenismo,
Likewise, indigenist art privileges the autochthonous: that which is indigenous rather than descended from colonists.

Parra traveled extensively, collecting popular music and traditions to ensure their preservation and continuation. Later the research from this fieldwork would inform her artistic practice. This is particularly evident in the oil painting *Las tres Pascualas* (1964). It is a narrative image based on a folktale about three women, sometimes referred to as sisters, who lived beside a lake in the Concepción region of Chile and died by drowning. The enigma of their death is at the center of the fable. In the version told by Ramón Laval, the sisters lived in a palace; their mother died; the sisters morally lost their way following the bereavement, and the palace flooded as a result of their wrongdoing. The lake then occupies the place of the flooded palace. In another version of the legend, the bodies of the three women are inexplicably found in the water by other women:

Una tarde, cuando otras compañeras llegaron hasta la laguna, encontraron flotando los cadáveres de Las Tres Pascualas. ¿Cuál fue la causa de esta desgracia? Se asomaron tanto al agua que cayeron y no pudieron salir, y perecieron de esta modo.10
A better-known version attributes their deaths to suicide: “ Según la leyenda, las mujeres de Las tres Pascualas se suicidaron en un lago y lo habitan como escenario de un amor infeliz y abortado.”\textsuperscript{11} In this version of the tale, their suicide is believed to be because they each fell in love with the same man: “Las Tres Pascualas amaban a un mismo hombre, y después de larga meditación en la noche anterior resolvieron poner término a sus días, arrojándose a la laguna que era su propio sustento.”\textsuperscript{12} According to this version of the legend, the sisters went to the lake each day to wash their clothes, and when the young man appeared at their home, they each fell in love with him: “Un día pasó por ahí un hombre del cual las muchachas se enamoraron y nació entre ellas un celo silencioso.”\textsuperscript{13} The romance is also mentioned in Plath’s account of the story:

Un día llegó hasta la casa de las tres muchachas un forastero en demanda de hospedaje, el que fue acogido gustoso por el padre de las jóvenes.

Todos los días al morir la tarde, regresaba hasta la casa el solitario forastero y miraba a las Pascualas que volvían cantando, al aire sus trenzas rubias y su atado de ropa sobre la cabeza.

El joven se enamoró de las tres hermosas muchachas y cada una, en secreto, le correspondió su amor.\textsuperscript{14}

There came a moment in the tale when the sisters realized that they were all in love with the same man: “Cuando se percataron de su falsedad las tres Pascualas se arrepintieron de haber arriesgado su amistad por el amor de un ingrato.”\textsuperscript{15} Pluralism is common in accounts from oral history. According to Agosín and Dölz-Blackburn, Parra painted two versions of the tale.\textsuperscript{16} Only one version is included in the official catalog of Parra’s work Violeta Parra: Obra visual, and this is the painting I discuss here (fig. 1).\textsuperscript{17}

Although the image of Las tres Pascualas is based on a popular tale, Parra has brought the tale to the realm of high art by including it in an oil painting, a medium, which is strongly associated with the aristocracy, the church, and patronage. Furthermore, she has done this in a style that is modernist. I use the term modernism as it is used in the visual arts to describe styles that depart significantly from classical forms. In the case of Las tres Pascualas, the modernism of the style is partly due to the color scheme. It has echoes of fauvism, an early avant-garde movement in European art, characterized by the use of nonnaturalistic colors. Parra has painted the women from this poignant tale in black, which serves to emphasize the darkness of their predicament. Like the fauvist art of the early twentieth century, Parra uses color principally to convey mood rather than to aid mimesis. As well as creating a somber tone, the color of the women in Las tres Pascualas recalls Chile’s most distinctive style of pottery: Quinchamalí ceramics. Ceramics from the Quinchamalí region of Chile are black with white engravings. Often, they are figurines; the shape of a woman playing the guitar is a very popular
design. In Parra’s painting of *Las tres Pascualas*, details have been simplified or removed and the image consists of a rounded black shape, which recalls the rounded form of Quinchamali ceramics. Some versions of the legend say that the women appear on the Noche de San Juan, and others say that they live in “un hermoso palacio encantado en el fondo de la laguna, donde esperan el retorno del hombre que las traicionó.”18 The narratives share the idea of three sisters, and Parra emphasizes their unity by presenting the three sisters as one form, merging their bodies into a single undulating shape along the bottom plane of the composition. The silhouette of the three siblings also recalls the curved contour of a lake, and the dark black hue that Parra chose recalls the darkness of the narrative and the description of the lake in the folktale. By painting this familiar story, Parra celebrates part of the Chilean collective imaginary. Lakes are a recurring motif in Chilean popular culture: “Lagos y lagunas están signados en los distintos imaginarios con diversas connotaciones.”19 According to Sonia Montesino Aguirre, in Chilean mythology lakes are often associated with narratives about ghosts or spirits who take refuge beneath the quietness of the water. Many of the tales relate back to the Incas.20 With time, the legend of *Las tres Pascualas* has also become a ghost story. Parra’s visual reworking of this narrative from collective lore relates to her desire to disseminate popular culture. Promoting cultures that were dying out was one of the values she was most passionate about.

A painting like *Las tres Pascualas* is able to generate two separate but interrelated levels of meaning. Foremost is the relationship it initiates with the viewer who is familiar with the tale. In Parra’s painting of *Las tres Pascualas*, the first effect is one of cultural representation: Parra presents a tale from the collective Chilean imaginary, which describes the way of life of the three sisters and, by doing so, makes the life of a certain demographic visible. At the same time, by representing a tale from the Chilean collective culture the painting elicits a sense of familiarity in people who can read the narrative, motifs, or other links with popular culture in the image. Art generates meaning by both form and the associations of such form. As Boas observes, “The emotions may not be stimulated by the form alone but by the close associations that exist between form and ideas held by the people.”21 This can occur even when these associations are subconscious. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Myths operate in men’s minds without them being aware of it.”22 Part of the psychological impact of the painting, whether cognitive or subconscious, lies in the emotion aroused by the popular tale. With reference to this type of nostalgia, Lovejoy and Boas observe: “When forms convey meaning, because they recall past experiences or because they act as symbols, a new element is added to enjoyment. The form and its meaning combine to elevate the mind above the indifferent emotional state of everyday life.”23

In the case of *Las tres Pascualas*, as with a great number of Parra’s works of art, the image relates directly to a legend in oral history, and to the rich
connotative values of lakes in different collective imaginaries in Chile. For the viewer who recognizes the legend, a link is formed between the painting and their own memory of the story that the painting presents. This adds a new element to the enjoyment of the painting, which, in turn, elevates the mind. This is what makes Parra’s visual art so poetic. This also venerates popular culture. By building an iconography, from the popular tale, the motif of the lake, and the color and shape of Quinchamalí ceramics, Parra is creating a work of art of great depth, which also shows the depth of popular culture.

With reference to Parra’s decasyllabic poetry, Catherine Boyle writes that it is “expressed through stark oppositions, recognized symbols and everyday realities and languages that are, in many ways, as available to everyone as they are to the privileged sensibility of the poet.” This employment of ordinary everyday symbols and language is also at the heart of Parra’s visual art; however, I would add a caveat: it is the everyday language of a variety of Chilean communities. People from outside of Chile may therefore find some of the subjects unusual or mysterious. This, of course, may explain the allure that Parra’s art held for European viewers when she exhibited in the Louvre in 1964. In his deconstruction of cultural artifacts, Pierre Bourdieu argues that “any art perception involves a conscious or unconscious deciphering operation.” He goes on to explain that within the hierarchical cultures we live in, “the sacralisation of culture and art fulfils a vital function by contributing to the consecration of the social order.” In other words, distinction between people, by class or otherwise, is represented as much by owning works of art, or owning (knowing) the language systems required to decipher works of art, as it is by economic standing. If we consider the painting of Las tres Pascualas from this perspective, it becomes apparent that its position in art history is somewhat anarchic. On the one hand, it employs the semiotics of high art: Parra has chosen to use the medium of the oil painting, an expensive medium associated with the elite in society. She has also used an aesthetic of nonnaturalistic colors and forms to convey mood echoing the modernist masterpieces of twentieth-century art. Thus, she allows educated viewers to enact the conscious or unconscious deciphering act that Bourdieu considers the foundation of the hierarchical cultural field; yet Parra’s art fused high art codes with other, simpler codes, such as those Catherine Boyle sees in her poetry: recognized symbols and everyday realities and languages that were accessible to everyone and indeed were particularly familiar to country-dwelling Chileans. If we consider the painting of Las tres Pascualas against this paradigm, it is clear that by privileging a narrative from Chilean popular culture, the painting takes an unusual position within discourses on the structures of value in art. If we consider the extract from Bourdieu, that art perception involves a deciphering operation and that hierarchical social order is reinforced by distinguishing those who have the codes to decipher art from those who do not, Parra’s art occupies...
an unusual position. The narrative depicted is one that is familiar to Chileans and therefore the information required to decipher the work of art is not exclusively held by more educated groups in society. Thus, Parra’s painting creates value for a demographic that is normally excluded: the subaltern. As a narrative from popular culture, the painting is able to engage with a wide group of people. This stands in contrast to classical Western art. Parra’s painting of the three Pascualas is accessible to all people who are familiar with popular culture. In this sense, it stands in opposition to those works of art whose analysis is restricted to people with some command of art-historical discourse.

Like the tale of Las tres Pascualas, Casamiento de negros is a story that has been passed on in the oral tradition. However, it does not appear to be based on a narrative fiction but rather on a popular quartet, a musical composition for four voices or instruments, and therefore the tale would traditionally have been sung. The song is well known in Chile, and in 1953, before creating a painting of Casamiento de negros, Parra released a musical version of it. The song remains one of her most favored tunes among Chileans. The song takes the form of a parabién. Parabienes are songs “dedicados a los recién casados, en los que desean felicidades” (Piña n.d., 170). Parra’s version has a unique twist since it deviates from the norm of congratulating the married couple, narrating instead the misfortunes that beset a black couple who get married. The narrative is threaded around the word black. Casamiento de negros provides a particularly clear example of the way Parra translated ideas from one artistic idiom to another.

As well as her musical version and her oil painting, which I analyze presently, she worked with the director Sergio Bravo on an experimental documentary film, also entitled Casamiento de negros, which narrated the black wedding tale using images of pottery from the Quinchamalí region. The black Quinchamalí ceramics are one of the most distinct forms of Chilean popular culture. By looking at the way Parra expressed the same subjects or popular myths in different forms, we can trace the conceptual basis from which Parra worked. Popular myths and legends bridge Parra’s visual, musical, and verbal production, creating a pattern that enables us to trace the values that drive her work. If we look at the themes Parra expressed in different mediums, we can see that she built a poetic syntax from a stock of subjects in Chilean collective culture.

In the undated painting Casamiento de negros Parra’s translation of motifs from one genre to another is clearest. It is essentially a tale of poverty and misfortune. It recounts the marriage of a black couple and the series of hardships that subsequently beset them. The simplicity of the popular quartet is reproduced visually in Parra’s painting, which is a picture chronicle of the events described in the song. Structurally, the painting is divided into seven frames, using backdrops of different tints and hues from a predominantly green palette to separate each section. In each frame, which together
establish a time sequence by dividing the tale chronologically, Parra details a different aspect of the marital story. Essentially, the frames in Parra’s painting tell the same story as the lyrics of the song. If the spectator reads each of these sections in sequence, from left to right, the full tale of adversity unfolds. In the first frame, at the left of the composition, the couple kneel in front of the priest to be married. In the second frame, the guests stand around the wedding table, which is set with a number of plates containing black-colored food and drinking receptacles. These first two sections of the painting correspond to the first two verses of the song, which describe the wedding, detailing all the black things that occur, from the black guests who attend to the black priest, the black tablecloths, and desserts:

Se ha formado un casamiento
todo cubierto de negro,
negros novios y padrinos,
negros cuñados y suegros,
y el cura que los casó
era de los mismos negros.
Cuando empezaron la fiesta
pusieron un mantel negro,
luego llegaron al postre
se sirvieron higos secos
y se fueron a acostar
debajo de un cielo negro.29

These first two sections of the painting are typical of the image as a whole; the motifs Parra uses in the song all figure in the painting, together with other details that complete the folk element of the story.

In the third section of the image, a harp and a guitar provide a musical context for the celebration and a figure dances the cueca (this is evident from their pose and the fact that they appear to be waving a handkerchief). These details link the image to Chilean music and anchor the narrative in Chilean cultural context. In the lyrics, the notion of black conveys the poverty of the pair—the coal they require for heating and the coldness of the black sky are the pictorial elements.

Y allí están las dos cabezas
de la negra con el negro
y amanecieron con frío,
tuvieron que prender fuego,
carbon trajo la negrita,
carbon que también es negro.30

This poverty is presented in the painting through the miserable expressions on the guests’ faces in the banquet scene, the distance between them and
the food, the scarcity of food on the wedding table, and the fact that no one appears to be eating. Parra has exaggerated these details using surrealist optical tricks. The chairs around the table, for example, do not appear to have any legs, and the people standing behind them appear to be disembodied. The invitees are assembled around the wedding table but seem unable to eat. One of the figures in front of the table to the right blends with the table since he is painted in the same brown hue as the wood of the furniture. Meanwhile, along from the brown figure, the corner of the table seems to go under the bride’s arm in an improbable manner. These are all typical surreal-ist illusions, which provide a visual humor that echoes the dry satirical tone of the song. In the final three sections of the painting, the bride becomes ill and the leitmotif black is used to convey the couple’s poverty by indicating that they do not have access to modern medicine:

Algo le duele a la negra.
Vino el médico del pueblo,
recetó emplasto de barro,
pero del barro más negro
y que dieran a la negra
zumo de maqui del cerro.31

We see the couple in bed, and trying to get warm beside a fire alongside a brown patch that could be the remedy of mud mentioned in the song. Also depicted is the arrival of the doctor on horseback. Finally, the bride dies, and in the last, and most detailed, frame of Parra’s painting we see the funeral of the deceased, with the other figures crouched around a black coffin like the one described in the song:

Ya se murió la negrita,
qué pena del pobre negro.
La echó dentro de un cajón,
cajón pintado de negro.
No prendieron ni una vela
¡ay que velorio tan negro!32

The structure of Parra’s painting shows an unusual use of a form borrowed from art history a narrative painting. The picture sermon, or istoria painting, played an important role in the conquest and socialization of the native population of Latin America, as levels of illiteracy were extremely high: “En el proceso de extensión de la religión católica y de la supremacía hispana por todo el continente nuevo, el arte desempeñaba un papel fundamental. La imagen —esculpida, grabada o pintada— constituye un importante medio de comunicación, el método de adoctrinamiento por excelencia en una sociedad, como aquella, mayoritariamente analfabeta.”33 The istoria prac-tice is one that lives on in popular art, and Parra’s work in this genre is
particularly interesting because the visual structure of her narrative painting recalls that of a comic strip and another form of Chilean popular narration: the *lira popular*. The *lira popular* were sheets of verse sold to train passengers. Using stanzas of ten octosyllabic lines (*décimas*), the *lira popular* detailed “los crímenes, las inundaciones, los naufragios, los terremotos, las elecciones y otras catástrofes nacionales,” providing a platform for the work of anonymous and renowned poets. It is believed that the *lira popular* tradition began at the end of the nineteenth century and that it was “una forma de difusión de la poesía nacida en España.” At some stage the poetic tradition had begun to be sung, giving rise to the Chilean *canto a lo divino y a lo humano*, also known as *canto a lo poeta*. The *canto a lo poeta* was a communicative practice that reiterated a series of collective oral narratives. There are countless examples of such narratives in Parra’s visual art just as there are in her music. For Dannemann, the *canto a lo poeta* is “uno de los géneros más relevantes de la cultura folclórica chilena [. . .] de raigambre juglaresca y severa preceptiva, que refleja en sus contenidos versificados en décimas una concepción orgánica del hombre y su medio.” Traditional poetry, the *canto a lo poeta* and the printed *lira popular* are all cognitively linked. As well as forming part of the Chilean cultural panorama, these traditions convey something of the essence of Chilean culture. It is in popular poetry that the essence of a nation is best expressed. Parra’s simple paintings take a place among this nexus of cultural signifiers. What Parra creates is an aesthetic that is rooted in this popular tradition but brings subjects from popular culture to new mediums and creates an artistic hybrid that regenerates popular culture.

Just as the narrative aspect of the popular tradition informed Parra’s lyrics, so the visual aesthetic of the *lira popular* informed her art. A simple aesthetic reminiscent of the *lira popular* enabled paintings like *Casamiento de negros* to communicate with a wide audience: “One of the reasons why the less educated beholders in our societies are so strongly inclined to demand a realistic representation is that, being devoid of specific categories of perception, they cannot apply any other code to works of scholarly culture than that which enables them to apprehend as meaningful objects of their everyday environment.” The *lira popular* also had a marked impact on the formation of national identity: “Su rol en la divulgación del pensamiento es de tal importancia que hoy se nos presenta como una fuente riquísima para el estudio no solo de la política, sino también de la cultura y las mentalidades.”

Technically the painting *Casamiento de negros* is uncomplicated; the figures lack form or realism. Parra does not strive to create three-dimensionality or true-to-life images. Her art is narrative—the issues of poverty, hardship, and mortality are the key concepts in this painting, but the lack of realism in the way Parra represents these subjects adds an air of humor to the depiction. This style allows the spectator an escape from the grim reality that Parra presents. Just as cartoons and satirical drawings are less intense an
aesthetic experience than a photograph, so, too, is Parra’s sketchy painting palatably humorous for the spectator. Yet at the same time, such images allow us to trace “procesos de representación de la nación, el imaginario colectivo y las representaciones simbólicas.”41 The wryness of the painting is in keeping with the tone of the parabién, which employed a surrealist humor based on pessimism about the fate of the newlywed couple. Within this veil of humor, the success of the Casamiento de negros painting and its musical counterpart also lies in the tragedy it describes and the universal magnetism of misfortune.

The humor Parra has included is valuable. Like the black humor of certain theatrical productions, it enables the spectator to enter into the tragedy but with the benefit of an escape: release in the form of laughter. Just as the painting of Las tres Pascualas generates elevated levels of artistic experience by linking with a tale that the spectator may know, the painting of Casamiento de negros achieves this elevated artistic experience through the link it has with Parra’s eponymous song. It also has further levels of familiarity for people who know the traditional tale of the black wedding in Chilean popular culture; people who are have heard the original popular quartet, and on a subtler level, it may have resonance for people who are familiar with the lira popular. While Casamiento de negros provides a textbook example of the way Parra translated ideas from her music into her visual art, many of the works of art that Parra created have an aural equivalent.

Thus far I have looked at paintings that link with Chilean popular culture in its most general form. Parra privileged the autochthonous culture of ordinary country folk. However, there is a core indigenist drive in Parra’s work, which is clearest in the works that relate to the traditions of the Mapuche people in Chile. Parra’s oil painting Machitún (1964–1965) depicts a ceremony called the Machitún. This ceremony is performed in Mapuche communities in Chile. The bold color scheme employed in the painting—bright, nonnaturalistic, pure colors—once again has echoes of fauvism. These bold nonnaturalistic colors are one of the hallmarks of the modernist art of the twentieth century. Machitún is divided horizontally by a backdrop of contrasting colors. This structure of the painting establishes a polarity that is reiterated within the narrative of the painting. The machitún is a healing ritual that is intended to ensure the community’s health.42 It is performed by a shaman figure—a machi—who is someone with an acknowledged level of wisdom in charge of the community’s well-being.43 The machi is usually female.44 In Parra’s painting, however, the form of the machi has been simplified and could be seen as having a masculine build. The central figure is identifiable as the machi as it is holding a kultrun (a drum that holds an important position in Mapuche culture and is played by machis). Below the machi on the ground a figure lies horizontally. This figure is the person being treated by the machi. In Parra’s painting, the machi or healer takes two forms: one solid black form and another gray spectral form. This duality
reflects her (or his) position as an intermediary between the realms of the terrestrial and the spiritual. A further duality is established by the painting itself; tonally it has all the hallmarks of modern art, yet it is representing an occurrence that is deeply traditional. As I have explained, this visual syntax is typical of Parra’s art as a whole: modern but rooted in tradition. Indeed, like the machi in the painting, and her oeuvre, Parra herself was an intermediary between the realm of tradition and the realm of the modern. Like the machi in the painting Machitún, Parra was trying to revive something that was close to death: folk culture.

Although Parra’s art enunciates a dialogue between ancient and modern aesthetics, it can be argued that a degree of cultural primitivism is evident within the extremely modern aesthetic of Machitún. Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas define cultural primitivism as “the discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it” and make the following observation: “It is the belief of men living in a highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or all respects is a more desirable life.”

Latin American history has meant that cultural primitivism in the region is driven by a postcolonial indigenist movement, which sought to vindicate traditional cultures. As I explained earlier, my use of the term indigenism invokes the conception of the term originally outlined by José
Carlos Mariátegui in *7 ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana*. In his research into the writings of Parra’s contemporary, José María Arguedas (1911–1969), the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa describes the intellectual climate of the era as follows: “Había un vigoroso movimiento de reivindicación del indio y de la tradición y la cultura quechuas por parte de periodistas, escritores, artistas y profesores universitarios que se llamaban indigenistas y reaccionaban críticamente contra la generación del novecientos, los llamados hispanistas o arielistas.”

The works in which Parra privileges Mapuche culture demonstrate the indigenism of her work. Parra went to Temuco, a town in Chile, in 1957, and asked where she could find a *machi* and Mapuche songs. This research was for her work for Universidad de Concepción. Parra lived with a Mapuche community for a month and interviewed the *machi* María Painen Cotaro. Thus, Parra’s inclusion of Mapuche traditions in her work stems from her research as a folklorist. Yet the painting that Parra creates brings her study of Mapuche culture together with her understanding of the aesthetics of modern art. Culture, like life, is impermanent and folk culture in particular is subject to economic, social, and technological factors, which are in constant flux. While the notion that folk culture is in danger of extinction and can be revived is the cornerstone of Parra’s work, Parra does not seek to present some frozen antique relic. What the painting *Machitún* demonstrates is that Parra chooses a modern style with nonnaturalistic blocks of color to create a vivid, striking image. Her work is the result of a profound study of popular culture, yet it is also in dialogue with popular culture and an agent of its transformation. Parra’s painting of the Machitún ritual can be seen therefore as a way of vindicating the Mapuche ritual within an utterly modern aesthetic. It exemplifies the way her work is driven by the urge to research, defend, and disseminate traditions that were diminishing. When Parra created paintings such as this and exhibited them in international galleries, she brought this ancient tradition to a new cultural space.

I have sought to demonstrate that Parra disrupted a paradigm in the arts in which popular culture occupies a subordinate position. Parra usurps this hierarchy using a hybrid visual syntax, which incorporates and validates popular culture. Parra also redefines the conception of popular culture by creating an aesthetic that is profoundly rooted in the Chilean collective imaginary but also has all the hallmarks of modern art. By including subjects like the oral folk tale of *Las tres Pascualas*, the story from the popular quartet “Casamiento de negros,” and the Machitún ritual of the Mapuche people, Parra privileges autochthonous themes and creates an expressive idiom built on the semiotics of Chilean popular culture. In this sense she honors the culture of the subaltern. Incorporating tales and motifs from Chilean popular culture such as the symbol of the lake, the aesthetic of Quinchamalí ceramics, or the popular songs she encountered during her research, Parra created an iconography from Chilean popular culture. Often, she employed this
popular iconography in indigenist artworks. What I have sought to demonstrate throughout this article is that Parra’s visual syntax is pluralistic. Her work sits on the cusp of popular art and modern art, and it is this hybridism that is central to Parra’s strategy for repositioning popular culture.

Thus, if Parra creates an idiom whose expressivity is quintessentially Chilean, she also creates an aesthetic that was on the cusp of the avant-garde. Her style uses nonnaturalistic colors and forgoes perspective in favor of blocks of color in a way that echoes fauvism. Within this modernist aesthetic Parra presents subjects and myths from the Chilean collective imaginary, creating a style of art that is utterly hybrid. By creating a visual poetic from myriad disparate sign systems, Parra regenerates Chilean popular culture. Yet Parra’s art also transcends the limitations of indigenism, discrediting the widespread myth that popular culture is fixed in a cultural temporality and impervious to change. Rather than fix popular culture, Parra develops an artistic style that allows traditional motifs to create a new expressive poetic.

Notes

3. Ticio Escobar, El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo, 9.
5. Isabel Parra, El libro mayor de Violeta Parra, 227.
6. This is an extract from an interview in 1954 with Marina de Navasal, which is reproduced in Marisol García, Violeta Parra en sus Palabras, 18.
7. José Carlos Mariátegui, 7 ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana, 4534.
8. Oreste Plath, Geografía del mito y la leyenda chilenos, 169.
11. Marjorie Agosín and Inés Dölz-Blackburn, Violeta Parra o la expresión inefable, 118. This version of the narrative is also mentioned by Plath, Geografía del mito, 168.
13. Sonia Montecino Aguirre, Mitos de Chile, 275.
15. Montecino Aguirre, Mitos de Chile, 275.
16. Marjorie Agosín and Inés Dölz-Blackburn, Violeta Parra o la expresión inefable, 118.
17. García Huidobro et al., Violeta Parra.
18. Montecino Aguirre, Mitos de Chile, 275.
27. Isabel Parra and Reiner Canales both mention that it is based on a popular quartet. See Isabel Parra, *El libro mayor de Violeta Parra*, 39; and Reiner Canales, “Violeta Parra y la cultura nacional a partir de dos valses en francés,” 145.
33. Isabel Cruz de Amenábar, *Arte y sociedad en Chile 1550-1650*, 32.
36. Manuel Dannemann, *Enciclopedia del folclore de chile*, 64.
38. Dannemann, *Enciclopedia del folclore*, 64.
47. Mario Vargas Llosa, *La utopía arcaica: José María Arguedas y las ficciones del indigenismo*, 57.
48. Paula Miranda, Elisa Loncon, and Allison Ramay analyze Parra’s research on Mapuche culture in *Violeta Parra en el Wallmapu, su encuentro con el canto Mapuche*, 16.

References


**Images Cited**

