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Indigenista perspectives in Argentine metal music

ABSTRACT

Indigenismo was a literary trend that originated in 1920s Peru and that further developed in many Andean countries, including Argentina. In Argentina, indigenista literature represented a reaction to the hegemonic ideals of civilization-versus-barbarism, which were deployed to justify the murdering and subjugation of indigenous peoples. Starting in the 1980s, many metal bands in Argentina adopt the same approach. This article will examine the way in which metal music in Argentina uses a twofold logic that simultaneously defends all aboriginal traits while condemning all foreign influences, all of this as bands use rhetorical devices that originate in metal music, devices external to the indigenous world and originating from a context of globalization and capitalism. This meditation is based on a socio-semiotic analysis of the output of a handful of bands.

KEYWORDS

Indigenismo
indigenous peoples
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At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, various Latin American countries experienced the rise of literary trends that aligned themselves with the independence philosophies growing out of their respective national and cultural settings: as American nation states were being formed, these literary trends had as their main objective the search for national identity. Among these trends, we can include: *Negrismo*, which grew out of Central America and the Caribbean; *Gauchesca* or Gaucho literature, originating out of Río de La Plata; and *Indigenismo*, developing in various Andean countries.

1. According to Mandrini (1987, 1993), 'malones' were attacks by indigenous peoples in response to 'abuses and aggressions perpetrated on them by Christians' (1993: 31). 'Malones' could also refer to the economic enterprise of plundering someone else's livestock for subsequent selling.

The latter was mainly analysed by Mariátegui (1963) and Cornejo Polar (1978), who agreed that the trend originated in Perú in 1920. For Cornejo Polar, *Indigenismo* represents a uniquely Latin American phenomenon of heterogeneous literature, marked by 'works situated at the conflictive intersection of two societies and two cultures' (Cornejo Polar 1978: 8), that is to say, societies and cultures defined as Hispanic and American. What grows out of this intersection can be called a mestizo narrative, a narrative characterized by the dual intention of valuing the aboriginal identity as it resists the advancing European culture, but doing so by depending on writers and literary styles foreign to the indigenous world.

Indigenismo also developed in Argentina; however, it had difficulties prospering there. Nicolás Alba (2016), one of the main researches of this topic, explains that these complications were due, on the one hand, to Argentina being a country 'comprised of less than 3% pure-bred indigenous peoples' (55), and, on the other hand, to the fact that hegemonic literatures erased the indigenous identity from its pages or, instead, opted to describe it as exotic and savage.

This lack of visibility has to do with the fact that the majority of indigenous peoples at that time had been 'killed, vanished, and assimilated' (Nicolás Alba 2016: 97) through the deployment of the brutal Desert Campaign as well as other processes of acculturation. Such campaigns arose from a dominant Eurocentric cosmopolitanism promoted by policies that welcomed the rise of European immigration. This philosophy, strengthened by widespread hegemonic ideals, found many intellectual backers, including the likes of Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, thinkers who believed indigenous peoples to be barbarians and who fully believed European civilization to be the true path towards progress (Nicolás Alba 2016: 96).

Literature in Argentina was greatly guided by these ideals, delineating the attributes that comprised an Argentine identity through Gauchesca Literature, a literature that promoted the gaucho as the national symbol. In addition to Gauchesca, Romanticism and the Generation of '37 deployed indigenous figures in their narratives about local concerns; however, they did so by describing these indigenous characters as savages who attacked and kidnapped white women during 'malones'.¹ Needless to say, such narratives reinforced the acceptance of the civilization-versus-barbarism official discourse.

Positioning themselves against these trends in the years between 1920 and 1930, various authors originating from the northern provinces of Argentina denounced the uneven treatment of indigenous peoples and brought a renewed valorization to these communities by putting forward narratives that exhibited traits similar to those contained in Peruvian *Indigenismo*. According to Nicolás Alba (2016), some of these authors included Juana Manuela Gorriti, Horacio Carrillo, Alcides Greca, Pablo Rojas Paz, César Carrizo, and Fausto Burgos, writers whose texts exhibited a strong social critique. Being writers who originated from the interior of the country proved relevant, given that the nation's capital served as the centre from where the civilizing ideals were being promoted.

Indigenismo would also manifest in other art forms of the era. For example, *Indigenismo* is present in the works of plastic artists such as Alfredo Gramajo Gutiérrez, Jorge Bermúdez, José Antonio Terry, and Francisco Ramona (Giordano 2009: 740). It is also evident in classical music, as evinced by the use of certain topoi and the pentatonic scale (Mondolo 2006; Plesch 2008) in

the *indigenista*-themed operatic works of Pascual de Rogatis and Constantino Gaito. *Indigenismo* was also present in Argentine popular music, as is the case in the songs written by Atahualpa Yupanqui and, starting in 1980, in the work of singer Heredia and musicians and rock bands like León Gieco, Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, Divididos and Los Violadores.

As far as metal music is concerned, *Indigenismo* becomes a recurring theme near the end of the 1980s through the work of the band *Hermética*, whose interest in generating a local brand of metal music leads it to seek out identity-focused elements in aspects of Argentine history. Indigenous peoples represent one such element, which they proceed to highlight. Subsequently, a great many metal bands in the country adopt the same approach.

Upon looking for academic works devoted to the relationship between Argentine metal music and indigenous peoples, one discovers the work of Kropff (2004, 2008a, 2008b), who studied the customs of certain communities of *mapuches* metalheads. Additionally, a number of non-academic articles describe how various metal bands align themselves with aboriginal communities (Rafanelli 2014) and establish ties with Argentine ancestral culture (Minore 2015). Nevertheless, we could not find any studies that consider the themes of whiteness and Occidentalism in metal music (Weinstein 2000: 111), attributes that inform the way many Argentine bands approach the aboriginal world.

Starting from the premise that *Indigenismo* as a literary genre appears at the moment 'an author, who identifies as an outsider to the indigenous communities, denounces the inequality experienced by these communities' (Nicolás Alba 2016: 54), I propose that various Argentine metal bands perform a similar intervention with their songs. However, I would argue that said denouncements are structured within an American identity characterized by a twofold rationale where both a populist nationalism and an enlightened progressivism coexist. The ideological dimension of Argentine metal music is characterized by a populist, romantic vision regarding all things indigenous. According to this line of thinking, anything considered indigenous stands as the only thing that is truly and purely Latin American (Martín-Barbero 1991: 205).

The purpose of this article is to consider the way in which some Argentine bands defend all things labelled aboriginal and condemn all things foreign, all the while emphasizing the metal genre, a genre whose style and structure are foreign to the indigenous world and more in line with capitalism and globalization. For the purpose of this study, I look at songs from bands like *Hermética*, *A.N.I.M.A.L.*, *Malón*, *Werken*,² *Yanaconas*,³ *Almafuerte*, *Tren Loco*, *Devastación*, *El Dragón*, *Raza Trunca*, *Mun Ra*, *L6b6t6my*, and *No Guerra*.⁴ Each song selected is approached as part of a social discourse and is, in turn, analysed through Eliseo Verón's social semiosis theory in order to understand its ideological dimensions.

According to Verón, ideological dimensions underlie any social discourse; they do so by engaging in a 'system of relations between any discourse and the (social) conditions that produce it.' (Verón 2004: 44, original emphasis). The relations referenced are, in turn, defined as the basic mechanisms behind social functioning, which vary according to the type of society they are found in. Verón adds:

The more we concentrate our interests in the social discourses that arise within industrial, capitalist societies, the more we realize that those mechanisms essentially correspond to the modes of production, to the structuring of society (structure and class struggle), and to the

2. *Werken* was a mapuche messenger (Contreras Painemal 2007).
3. *Yanaconas* was a type of serfdom within Inca society (Basadre Ayulo 1989: 193). This type of submission is different than Malón, a category reserved for indigenous subjects who could be characterized as warriors.
4. The songs selected for this study were as follows: 'Cráneo Candente' (1989) and 'La Revancha de América' (1991) by *Hermética*; 'Criminales de Raíces' (1993), 'Solo por ser Indios' (1994), 'Hijos del Sol' (1993), 'Aliento Inocente' (1998) and 'Gritemos para no Olvidar' (2001) by *A.N.I.M.A.L.*; 'Los Kilmes' and '500 años, ¿de qué?' (2006) by *Tren Loco*; 'Originarios' by *Mun Ra*; 'Malón Mestizo' (1995) and 'Grito de Pilagá' (1996) by *Malón*; 'Sentir Indiano', 'Zamba de Resurrección' (1995) and 'Rubén Patagonia' (1996) by *Almafuerte*; 'Identidad', 'Amargo Obrero' and 'La Muerte del Indio' (2008) by *Devastación*; 'Espada Mortal' (2014) by *El Dragón*; 'Rubores Indios' (2010) by *Raza Trunca*; 'Ignorancia por Ley', 'Tupac Amaru', 'Razas del Sur' and 'Por la Sangre Derramada' (1999) by *Yanaconas*; 'Sangre India' (2010) by *Werken*; 'Indian Massacre' (1993) by *L6b6t6my*; 'Chukinfe' (2012), 'Weychan', 'Conquistadores de Muerte' and 'Territorio Latino Sigue Vivo' (2014) by *No Guerra*. These bands originate out of different provinces within Argentina.

structuring of the political order (structure and functioning of the State). The ideological analysis of the production of common sense is nothing other than *the search for the traces these social mechanisms leave behind within social discourses*.

(Verón 2004: 46, original emphasis)

With this consideration in mind, I will first reveal the operations that account for the aboriginal presence. Second, I will move on to expose those operations related to the metal genre's rhetorical choices (discursive strategy). Once this is done, I will offer some final remarks.

The foreign versus the aboriginal: Which side does Argentine metal support?

Following Verón's theory, the analysis in this study consists in describing the operations that 'lead to the ideal conditions for the production of a discourse' (Verón, 204: 51), operations that can be reconstructed if we follow the traces left on the discursive surface. In each of the songs selected, the dominant rhetorical operation is the antithesis, through which the songs propose two divergent positions: on the one hand, the figure of the foreigner; on the other, that of the aborigine.

However, once these positions are established, the musical groups choose invariably to stand with the indigenous peoples by way of three distinct operations. First, they assume a first-person perspective through which the song's 'I' takes on the indigenous viewpoint. Examples of this method occur in the songs 'Grito de Pilagá' by *Malón* (We were the first here/our natural essence is here/they have stolen our firmament/they destroy us through famine) and 'Los Kilmes' by *Tren Loco* (My blood is calchaquí/I'm a son of the Kilmes).

A second operation consists of identifying the aborigine as a peer or a family member through the use of the expression 'brother'. This particular method can be heard in songs like 'Originarios' by Mun Ra and 'Sangre India' by *Werken*. Finally, the sense of belonging is further expressed through the use of the possessive pronoun 'our', as happens in the songs 'Criminales de raíces' by *A.N.I.M.A.L.* (Our Indians were harassed/they died fighting) and 'Rubores Indios' by *Raza Trunca* (the fires of our peoples reborn). Each of these examples is not just about the defense of the aborigine but also about identifying with him as the symbol of the true Argentine identity.

Within this dichotomy, the foreigner is described as the aggressor and the aborigine as the victim. The bands condemn the foreigner as the purveyor of violence, a thief and a murderer, attaching verbs like 'enslave', 'take away', 'traffic', 'pillage', 'submit', 'deceive', 'kill', 'rape', 'force', 'stain', 'dismember' and 'massacre' to this identity. The condemnation is also enacted through the usage of *parrhesia*, as happens, for example, in the line 'the sinister grip of the Mother Bitch' as found in one of *Hermética's* songs in reference to Spanish colonizers.

In contrast, aborigines are described through adjectives like 'pillaged', 'submitted', 'defenseless', 'innocent', 'besieged', 'massacred', 'dominated', 'poisoned', 'impoverished', 'persecuted', 'misunderstood' and through nouns like 'captive', 'prisoner' and 'slave'. These descriptions of natives as victims refer equally to those living during colonial times as well as those in present times. The latter have lost their lands, which have been bought by foreigners, a situation described in the song 'Razas del sur' by *Yanaconas*, where they sing 'Government-sponsored colonial vultures/propped up by the State'.

In addition to describing them as victims, the bands present the indigenous peoples as warriors, justifying their fight as a form of self-defense and resistance. One example of this type of representation takes place in the song 'Aliento Inocente' by *A.N.I.M.A.L.*, a song that focuses on the dissimilar treatment of the aborigine in contrast to that of the colonizer: 'sticks and stones resisting the sword'. Another example occurs in the song 'Territorio Latino Sigue Vivo' by *No Guerra*: 'Warriors of the natural way/Defenders of Mother Earth'.

The bands also tackle *mestizaje* through reference to the descendants of the aborigines, who are also presented as victims, in this case, of a symbolic violence enacted in the perpetuation of the civilization/barbarism binary and the continued preference for foreign input in relation to neo-liberal economic and cultural policies. Musical groups *Malón* and *Yanaconas* describe this segment as inhabitants of 'nuevas tolдерías' in reference to the concept of 'villas miseria'.⁵

5. According to Pascual (2013), 'villas miseria' are 'spaces usually located within enormous metropolitan centers, occasionally on abandoned, usurped, or government lands, which have been overtaken by groups which predominantly belong to the working class or the poor' (1) and could be characterized as poor and marginalized.

Non-aboriginal rhetorical choices

As I mentioned above, the songs that were chosen enact the same methods found in literary *Indigenismo*, as they look at the aboriginal from an outsider's perspective. The initial way in which this occurs is through the choice of language used in the composing of these songs: the majority was written in Spanish, with only one being written in English ('Indian Massacre'). Despite some of these songs including aboriginal words – this includes their use in song titles – the songs themselves are guided by the rules of the Spanish language, the predominant language in Argentina.

All of the songs analysed belong to the metal genre (i.e. heavy metal, thrash metal, power metal, death metal and nü metal); consequently, I would argue that, as is the case with literary *Indigenismo*, they express their denouncement of violence against the indigenous peoples through the use of a musical form alien to the aboriginal world. A reason for this assessment is the fact that metal music as a transnational style that came to fruition in 1970s Great Britain, subsequently finding its way around the world during the following decade (Weinstein 2011). As was the case in many other countries, metal bands in Argentina proceeded to infuse metal – a musical style that could be labelled nomadic (Mendivil 2016) – with local traits.

It is because of the presence of these traits that the songs selected, despite referring within their content to specific Argentine themes, respond to an analysis that foregrounds the rhetorical choices of metal music. Out of these choices, the one that stands out is the use of chaotic imagery; this is achieved through constant reference to death and destruction. The imagery allows the bands to describe in brutal detail not just the way in which indigenous peoples have been harmed, but the way the land, particularly in Argentina and other American territories, has been invaded. One example of this representation can be heard in the track 'Solo por ser indios' by the group *A.N.I.M.A.L.*: 'blood spilled on the land/terror and faith/punished for being born Indians'.

Another way these songs connect to the theme of chaos is through their references to Judeo-Christian religions (Weinstein 2000). This happens in some of the songs that denounce territorial invasions. In this case, the songs highlight paganism, usually by evoking the figure of Pachamama, the Andean aborigine's equivalent to Mother Earth. This figure is juxtaposed against Catholicism, the latter often presented as a tool employed in the conquest

of America. Some examples of this method include *Tren Loco's* 'Los Kilmes': 'Pachamama, our god, Mother Earth.../something you'll never understand', as well as *Almafuerte's* 'Sentir indiano': 'Terrorism, Satan, and Christ were all created by the White God'.

Not only is the land seen as a sacred element, but it is also presented as the victim of environmental contamination. This particular presentation aligns these songs with themes common to thrash metal, which allude to the horrors perpetrated by humanity against the environment (Weinstein 2000: 50). The song 'Espada Mortal' by *El Dragón* offers a great example of this approach: 'Forrest, mountains, and plains/all were leveled by the invader'. Not only does the language of destruction serve as a way to condemn the actions of the foreign colonizer, but it also allows for the championing of the figure of the aborigine as an emblem of a peaceful past where humanity lived harmoniously alongside nature, a theme that runs through the song 'Conquistadores de muerte' by *No Guerra*: 'The hills and nature/are my cradle'.

As has been mentioned, the aborigine is also described as a warrior whose virility and strength are exalted, traits that converge seamlessly with metal music's ominous style and the masculine culture that characterizes the genre (Weinstein 2000). Examples include the song 'Solo por ser indios' by *A.N.I.M.A.L.*: 'Innocence and courage/inhabit one being', and 'Sangre India' by *Werken*: 'I long to have/Indian blood in my veins/to inherit some drops/ of fearless Ranquel's blood'.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, we have seen how the rhetorical operation known as antithesis governs the way each band denounces all foreign influence. This same choice allows the bands to enlist their music in the defense of everything that is considered native, or more specifically, aboriginal. This juxtaposition represents an ideological response to the civilization/barbarism dichotomy that developed and was imposed as a hegemonic ideal by the dominant classes during the rise of literary *Indigenismo*. Upon recognizing that these songs generally align in favour of the indigenous peoples, we can argue that their ideological dimension lines up with the nationalist populism that champions anything considered aboriginal as that which is truly American.

The fact that many of the songs not only enact a revision of the American conquest but also touch on the current cultural and economic imperialism transforms both the civilization-barbarism and the colonizer-colonized dichotomies into oppressor-oppressed and dominator-dominated dichotomies. This stands as evidence of the prevalence of hegemonic ideals in current times.

We can conclude that, much as García Canclini (2012) has pointed out, 'globalizing processes accentuate interculturality' (23); thus, Argentine bands can tackle local conflicts through the use of a musical style that originated in a British context. The ideological dimension of these discursive practices brings us closer to an understanding of the ways Argentines and Latin Americans perceive their own identities. 'In choosing a relation of interrogation and skepticism regarding the social realm', these bands 'produce a "counter-epic"' (García Canclini 2012: 346) that goes against the neo-liberal hegemonic discourse.

The use of metal music as a tool to broach the subject of the aboriginal functions the same way literary *Indigenismo* did. As was the case with the literary

genre, which was viewed as a mestizo and heterogeneous literature, the songs analysed here serve as an example of hybridization. Additionally, metal music and its rhetorical choices make the genre ideal for the creation of a discourse that denounces social ills, the reason for this being that the genre presents itself as a counter hegemonic and countercultural entity. An analysis of the rhetorical choices allows us to comprehend the way its practitioners envision their socio-historical context, which in the current climate functions as a reaction against the return of neo-liberalism.

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