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“Nitrate and Writers: Literature of Minerals in Mid-Century Chile”

As you know my subject of study is Latin American literature of mining. This literature is present but at the same time hidden from most; it is perhaps as subterranean as its referent. Even the most authoritative commentators fail to see how this literature, this discourse, this poetics runs like a mineral vein through the corpus. Latin America is no exception. This literature of mining survives and persists like the mineral itself. Or like a group of minerals, a vein which runs rhizomatically independent of any will or desire for order and hierarchy.

My aim today is to bring together the history of the region and the history of mining literature to unveil different aspects about this strange relation. In Chile, like in most countries, literature of mining is barely acknowledged and usually conceived as a form of regionalism originating from the north (the Norte Grande) and mainly concerned with one important event, the Santa Maria School Massacre of 1907. But it remains caught in that trauma and does not achieve an identitarian projection vis-à-vis the whole of the country or at least a politically-inflected narrative that embodies the literary identity of the Chilean subject. Far from it these narratives are relegated and understudied.

Hijo del Salitre (1952) narrates the social epic of the nitrate workers of the great north, Norte Grande culminating in the infamous Santa Maria School Massacre of 1907. Following the precepts of social realism, the novel tells the story of a devoted mass leader, Elias Laferte, and the human and social injustices that he faces together with the other saltpeter workers.

Hijo del Salitre can be read as the bildungsroman of Elias. We're told about his formative years in the nitrate camps of the north, his becoming a miner and a social leader. Later he becomes aware of the momentous nature of his work as a mining leader and labor activist when the strike of Iquique in the becomes the largest in the country's history.

Hijo del salitre leaves a testimony of a historical period characterized by abuses in the mining industry and low levels of life at the beginning of the century in Chile. We as the audience are exposed to a few recurrent thematic lines: the constant mistreatment of workers, the mismanagement of the governments that preceded President Pedro Montt, the president of the republic who ordered the violent resolution of the strike, the bribes paid by foreigners who had their investments in the country, all this propelled the complex social and political scenario that Chile faced and materialized in the strike of the pampa nitrate miners. Chilean society faced a crisis from the late 19th century onwards: what was delicately referred to at the time as the "social question"—namely, "the problem of worsening living and working conditions in the country's mining centers and major cities." The nitrate miners' strike of December 1907 was the last of a series of strikes and other forms of unrest.

Contrary to the common notion that Volodia Teitelboin's novel *Hijo del Salitre* can be read as a novel that is "exclusively Chilean and national," following Jose Victorino Lastarria's *Discurso inaugural de la sociedad literaria de 1842* I argue that the literature of mining is characterized exactly by an opposite impulse and tendency. That is, by its international or a-national nature in two senses. The first means that there is a series of similar discourses and referents which tend to appear in literatures of different countries (social concerns, aesthetic and representation choices, political subtexts), but also where mineral exploitation conditions similar social and economic patterns over the life of miners regardless of their country of origin, Chile, Bolivia or Peru.

I read passages from the text of *Hijo del Salitre* which recuperate this internationalist class based solidarity when confronting capital's military direct violence to argue that Chilean literature of mining is remarkably internationalist following the traces left by itinerant socialist and anarchist ideas which traveled from north to south, from nitrates camps in the Norte Grande to underground cooper mines in the geographical center of the country.

The novel chronicles the strike and its violent resolution in the Santa Maria School Massacre and how this event became important in the Chilean labor history. But here I would like to focus on another issue which is the at least temporary loss of links to the national group by the subjects most exposed to violence and the cohesion of capital. Let's recall that in this strike participated Chilean and foreign miners from nations bordering Chile in the Norte Grande: Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. These nationals were born in their respective countries but due to the result of the War of the Pacific (1879-1884) they became part of Chile without ever considering themselves as such. During the strike and even the massacre all joined with a common goal, to assert their rights and demand better working conditions. This meant that in a way they acted and felt as a single body united by ties of class solidarity rather than by association to a national group. Even when Peruvians and Bolivians are alerted by their respective consuls as documented in primary sources and also in Teitelbon's novel, they refuse to abandon their Chilean coworkers who were housed in the Santa Maria school, and expose themselves to danger and eventually death. Even the consuls of Argentina and Peru according to the novel are English or foreign.

The Bolivian workers responded to their consul: "With the Chileans we came, with the Chileans we die."¹ We also read historical passages that tell us about this reorganization of national

¹ With the Chileans we came, with the Chileans we die." In "La roja historia: La masacre de la escuela Santa María" Iván Ljubetic Vargas.

identities "The numerous column of strikers of Alto San Antonio arrived at the port of Iquique, seat of the regional government, carrying flags of Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina, staying at the racecourse of the port."²

In the last pages of *Hijo de Salitre* where Teitelboim describes the last words enunciated in a collective panic when the striking multitudes felt the attack of the Chilean army against them we witnessed an even clearer expression of the idea, the miners and their families shouted: "We do not want to be Chileans anymore! We do not want to be Chileans anymore!"³ My thesis here is that this renunciation of national identity seems to be reproduced in territorial areas where the state has not only entered into a deep crisis as a citizen protection entity but reveals through its direct violence the profound inoperability of regulating national community life in a given territory in addition to its de jure and de facto impotence.

So it is at the limits of capitalism that states seem to deploy and retreat more obviously: in an inoperative and failure in what is called "state presence" and at the same time in an exhibition of the most excessive militarism showing a kind of conquest and land management at the most basic level: the legitimate use of force. It is a strange symmetry that does not surprise us: in indefinite lands, the most nationalistic and intensified cultural and social attitudes and expressions are accentuated. Whether in the jungle of the Amazon or in the nitrate deserts of northern Chile, national identities are reinforced and imposed with emphasis by the monopoly of factual violence because the national subjects have ceased, are diluting or are in the process of communal solidarization, a solidarity that risks the stability of commanding national identities.

² Zolezzi Velásquez, Mario. [La Tercera](#) (1999). «[La huelga de los 18 peniques](#)». Archivado desde [el original](#) el 14 de diciembre de 2007. Consultado el 21 de diciembre de 2007.

³ Hijo 446.

Many times these associations precede the nation state, as the indigenous and aboriginal communities that are in areas of border dispute, other times the groups are part of a predefined citizenship, but the conditions of a margins capitalism have pushed them towards a new resignificacion of what we call citizenship (legal) or belonging to the national group (affect). The symbolic belonging or identification is diluted as much as the national colors of the relevant countries are blended in the episode about the flags: the dilution or thinning of national groups undermines the logic of the national: one territory, one people. This arises when the capitalism of margins (a machine fueled by natural and human resources that moves in space) -a capitalism without the institutions and guarantees that the liberal system promises and takes for granted-, goes into a territorial space finding little or no oppositional force pushing nature and men into ultimate exploitation. At such extreme point, the capitalism of margins as an unleashed beast, produces its own dialectical antithesis. This dialectical antithesis takes a form that is not determined. In Chile and Bolivia, we know that the form was organization of mining workers. In the case of rubber explorations in the Amazons (*La voragine*) it materialized in outrage of the liberal bourgeoisie and proposals to end such practices. The novel of the earth, that is to say, the novel of rubber, of nitrate, of oil, seems to emit signals pointing towards reorganizations and similar behaviors. In the Venezuelan fiction about early oil exploitation (*Mancha de Aceite*) authors represent and reflect their desire for worker organization to fight back the abuses of capital.

In the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels wrote that "The working men have no country." This speaks of the internationalist character of the struggle of the revolutionary proletariat, of the common interest of the working class of all countries in struggle against capital and the international bourgeoisie.

History, unofficial rather popular, shows that the divisions between Chilean, Bolivian, Peruvian people involved in the War and then assimilated as a single class, the working class, are not so clear and forceful but rather created by the ruling classes. In union conflicts these divisions are erased to give rise to self-conception and self-consciousness as a block with a class identity, not a nation, with manifestations of solidarity among individuals united by class, not by affiliation or national identity. In the Chilean mining literature this is reflected, specifically in *Hijo del Salitre*, which is perhaps the most combative and denouncing text in the Chilean mining narrative.