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## Violeta Parra and the Empty Space of La Carpa de la Reina

Catherine Boyle

“Lo que el alma hace por su cuerpo es lo que el poeta hace por su pueblo.” (Gabriela Mistral)

La Carpa de la Reina was essentially a large circus marquee (“carpa”) set up by Violeta Parra in La Reina, a city region in the north-west of Santiago close to the foothills of the Andes mountain range. La Carpa was intended by Violeta Parra to be a venue for the performance of Chilean music, dance and for the exhibition of artwork. Opened on 17 December 1965, it was also to be a cultural centre in which she could bring to fruition her plan for a National University of Folklore. This was the artistic and didactic endeavour to which Violeta Parra devoted her enormous energy and belief in the last years of her life. La Carpa is, however, mostly remembered now as an ambitious yet fatally conceived project, the site of Violeta Parra’s decline in a seemingly inexorable path towards her suicide on 5 February 1967. La Carpa de la Reina has become a type of myth, as her son Angel Parra has said.<sup>1</sup> He is right: La Carpa seems made from citations that turn into air, from stories, anecdotes, memories, testimonies. There is nothing remaining of it: very few images and some recordings, including one with different artists, *La Carpa de la Reina. Violeta Parra y otros intérpretes* (1966), and her final record, *Las últimas composiciones de Violeta Parra* (1966), which includes the work she wrote during her last years.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I start to reconstruct the space of La Carpa and recuperate it as a place for the realisation of the goals of her life’s work, a space for creativity and apprenticeship, for teaching and learning, and for bringing dignity, recognition and renewal to the folk music, dance and art of Chile. La Carpa

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<sup>1</sup> *La Carpa. Un sueño Violeta*, Natalia Comtesse Bamón, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaeGi3da4j8>.

<sup>2</sup> *La Carpa de la Reina. Violeta Parra y otros intérpretes*, Odeon, 1966; *Las últimas composiciones de Violeta Parra. Acompañamientos instrumentales de Isabel y Angel Parra*, RCA Víctor, 1966. .

de la Reina was the culmination of her development as an artist; that it failed is also the tragedy of her life's final labour.

Violeta Parra came to own La Carpa almost by accident. The story has been told in many testimonies, and, inevitably, the details and emphasis shift according to the narrator and time, but the bare bones are as follows. In late 1965, the photographer Sergio (Queco) Larraín recounts, he and his business partner (a German woman only ever given her first name of Gretel) were offered a place in the Feria Internacional de Santiago (FISA). Seeing the size of the plot, they put up an enormous marquee, covered only by canvas, and their idea was to make an impromptu venue celebrating Chilean culture. Larraín asked Violeta, who had recently returned from Europe to Chile, to be involved, performing and presenting Chilean music and dance. She agreed, but she insisted on reshaping the space by creating walls so that they could perform in it properly. La Carpa was born.<sup>3</sup> The success of the venture rested largely on Violeta's power to attract audiences and with what is recounted as her customary energy and command (and inevitably involving her family), she, together with Gretel, managed to open the venue for Chilean performance, food and wine. The project at the FISA was only partly successful: costs had soared and were to be paid in instalments and the two women clashed over the management of the accounts, with Gretel leaving and Violeta taking over La Carpa. In the end, as Fernando Sáez notes, "Violeta quedó como única y endeudada dueña del asunto" (Violeta was left as the sole and indebted owner of the business).<sup>4</sup> The "business" was physically enormous—there was capacity for, according to different commentators, two hundred, five hundred or one thousand spectators—and financially a burden, but she installed it in Cañada 7200, in the old Parque La Quintrala in La Reina, on

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<sup>3</sup> This is from the testimony of Sergio Larraín in Bernardo Subercaseaux, Patricia Stambuk and Jaime Londoño, *Gracias a la vida. Violeta Parra, Testimonio* (Santiago: Editorial Granizo / CENECA, 1982), 77-8.

<sup>4</sup> Fernando Sáez Sáez, *La Vida Intranquila. Violeta Parra. Biografía Esencial* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Radio Universidad de Chile, 2007), 151.

land ceded to her free by the local mayor, Fernando Castillo Velasco. It was set in a terrain of four hectares, in which Violeta lived in an adobe house made by her brother, the musician Roberto.<sup>5</sup> Carmen Luisa, Violeta's daughter who lived with her, has described La Carpa in these terms:

La Carpa era forrada por los lados con madera hasta la mitad. De ahí hasta arriba empezaba la lona formando un cono de cinco. Tenía como unos cuarenta metros de diámetro y el escenario era un tabladito con una silla para cantar y algunos instrumentos, guitarrones, un arpa, bombo y charango. En todo el medio de la carpa, donde queda, digamos, el palo mayor, estaba el fogón y desde por ahí empezaban las mesas en círculo mirando el escenario, sillas y mesas así en varias hileras, de modo que la gente quedaba como en un teatro.

(The sides of La Carpa were covered with wood to halfway up. Then the canvas started, forming a circus cone. It was about forty metres in diameter and the stage was a little platform with a chair for singing and some instruments, *guitarrones*, a harp, *bombo* (drum) and *charango*. Right in the middle of the marquee where, let's say, the main pole was, was the stove and from there the tables started, in a circle, facing the stage, chairs and tables in rows, so that it was as if the people were in a theatre.)<sup>6</sup>

On 17 December 1965 La Carpa de la Reina was opened in a ceremony that augured well for its success and during which she distributed leaflets that told of the goals of the venture:

De día, se darían talleres de guitarra, pintura y artesanía. Y de noche, la carpa se transformaría en una peña. "Aquí se escucharán las canciones desconocidas, las que

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriela García, "En busca de la carpa de Violeta Parra", *La Tercera*, 7 August 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Subercaseaux et al, 78-9.

brotan de las mujeres campesinas, las quejas y alegrías de los mineros, las danzas y la poesía de los isleños de Chiloé", escribió Violeta en un cuaderno de tapas negras.

(During the day there would be workshops on guitar, painting and crafts. And by night La Carpa would become a club. 'Here people will hear unknown songs, that burst from peasant women, the laments and allegros of the miners, the dances and the poetry of the Chiloé islanders' Violeta wrote in a black notebook.)<sup>7</sup>

There were immediate problems, for example, the practicalities of opening near Christmas 1965, with the summer holidays in the southern hemisphere. More significantly, the site was far from the centre of the city, "en un sector casi despoblado" (an almost unpopulated area).<sup>8</sup> This was a part of the city with no access by public transport, so difficult to access without convoluted travel arrangements or private cars; "el problema descorazonaba a mucha gente" (many people were disheartened by the problem).<sup>9</sup> Her son, Angel, recounts that what could be seen from La Carpa was the Andes, not the built up roads of the city. And her daughter, Isabel, has said that the park in which the plot was set could only be called such a thing because of some poplars that had survived the harsh winters.<sup>10</sup> Finally, La Carpa was situated in the midst of a community to which neither she nor her music and project belonged, and in which she experienced the indifference or hostility of her neighbours. In the words of the Uruguayan Alberto Zapicón, who started off in La Carpa as a type of handyman and later worked with her as a musician and treasured companion, playing and singing on *Las últimas composiciones de Violeta Parra*:

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<sup>7</sup> Pastor Aucapan, in Subercaseaux et al, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Patricio Manns, *Violeta Parra. La guitarra indócil* (Concepción: Ediciones Literatura Americana Reunida, 1987), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Parra, *El libro mayor de Violeta Parra* (Madrid: Libros de Meridion), 141.

Ellos (sus vecinos) tienen que haberse sentido molestos y extrañados, porque veían que la gente que llegaba a la Carpa era toda gente con auto o en taxi, por el hecho de que eran extranjeros y para llegar hasta allí, había que ir necesariamente en taxi o en coche particular, puesto que no había micro. De golpe en las noches se producía como una fiesta de gala... pero de día veían a una mujer chascona, el pelo enredado, medias azules, los zapatos amarillos, gente pobre.

(They [her neighbours] must have felt annoyed and surprised, because they could see that the people who came to La Carpa all came by car or taxi, for the simple reason they were foreigners and to get there, you had to go by necessity by taxi or private car, since there were no buses. All of a sudden, at night time a type of gala would happen ... but during the day what they saw was a disheveled woman, her hair all in knots, blue stockings, yellow shoes, poor ...)<sup>11</sup>

In sum, the audiences did not arrive there, the locals complained, physical conditions were difficult, and “los planes de Violeta ... se estrellaban contra la dura roca de la indiferencia” (Violeta’s plans came crashing against the hard rock of indifference”.<sup>12</sup> And Zopicán, for whom the song “El Albertío” was written, also tells of the absurd bureaucracy of the Municipality of La Reina that (despite the mayor having given her the land knowing what she was planning) would, for example, cut the electricity because electric light was not allowed in the park and she would have to apply to have it re-installed, or wrongly accuse her of illegally selling alcohol (what she did provide was a sweet non-alcoholic drink called “mistela”), or the premises, including her private quarters, would be inspected by the police.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alberto Zopicán, in Subercaseaux, 85. There is an interesting documentary on Alberto Zopicán in which he talks about his life in La Carpa with Violeta Parra: *Siempre en mi memoria Alberto Zopicán. Un abrazo desde Chile Viejo Amigo*, Televisión Uruguaya, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Pastor Aucapan, in Subercaseaux et al, 80.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-6.

These anecdotes, gathered by different researchers in books and documentaries, are important in constructing a picture of the space of La Carpa de la Reina, of the energy with which it was infused and of the myriad problems by which it was beset.

Marisol García sees, in the letters of Violeta Parra a woman “a cargo de su historia y de su deber con ella” (in charge of her history and her duty to it) and notes that she was always determined to fulfil her goals: “Lo que dice, Violeta lo hace” (What Violeta says, she does).<sup>14</sup> But she also noted the single-mindedness needed to deliver “una labor ideada, desrollada y gestionada por ella sin ayuda oficial ninguna” (a labour conceived, developed and managed by her alone with absolutely no official help).<sup>15</sup> Angel Parra notes the consistent lack of support for his mother’s vision and projects, the limited numbers of people in positions of power and influence who actively recognised her, and the failed projects that resulted from this.<sup>16</sup> The testimonies of her time in La Carpa evidence a woman determined to see the project through, driven by enormous creative energy and fired by the belief in her long apprenticeship in the folk arts of Chile. She had worked to become an artist of the highest calibre and had returned to Chile having exhibited her tapestries at the Louvre (1964), been the subject of a Swiss documentary, “Violeta Parra. Bordeuse Chilienne” (1964), and achieved major recognition as a folklorist and performer. A woman at the height of her artistic powers. Yet, the testimonies turn on the depiction of a woman *in extremis*, in a state of agitation, desperate in the loss of the love of her long-time companion Gilbert Favré, and increasingly convinced of the escape of suicide. Violeta’s sister Hilda tried to warn her against the place because it was so isolated and she suggested a mobile tent that would allow her to go from place to place and to continue her work of reaching the audiences that

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<sup>14</sup> Marisol García, “Violeta Parra: cartas perentorias,” *Revista Dossier*, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Juan Armando Epple and Angel Parra, “Entretien avec Angel Parra,” *Cahiers du monde hispanique et luso-brésilien*, No. 48 (1987), 122.

sustained her. But, she said, Violeta wanted to create a type of ‘circo chamorro’.<sup>17</sup> This is a reference to the most popular form of Chilean entertainment and one that had evolved to encompass folk acts, attracting large audiences to it wherever it went, and the idea of her Carpa as such a place for community creates a strong link with her early performing years in such places.

La Carpa, as the culmination of Violeta Parra’s work, has become an important referent for popular and folkloric music in Chile, though it does so from a type of mystical place and in the absence of a physical trail, of connection to its concrete being. Its place is based on the performative legacy of music that she produced at different stages of her development as a musician, folklorist and songwriter. Her labour is recognised as being pivotal to the *nueva canción chilena*, the new song movement that produced, among others, Víctor Jara, Inti Illimani and Quilapayún, inspired by protest song, Chilean folk music and Andean music. Víctor Jara, the new song musician who was brutally murdered in the military coup of 1973, spoke for others when he said:

En la creación de este tipo de canciones la presencia de Violeta Parra es como una estrella que jamás se apagará. Violeta, que desgraciadamente no vive para ver este fruto de su trabajo, nos marcó el camino: nosotros no hacemos más que continuarlo, darle, claro, la vivencia del proceso actual.

(In the creation of this type of song, Violeta Parra is like a star that will never burn out. Violeta, who unfortunately did not live to see this fruit of her work, showed us

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<sup>17</sup> Subercaseaux et al, 78. There is a 1955 film called *El Gran Circo Chamorro*, written by Eugenio Retes and directed by José Bohr that celebrates the popular circus and the ways in which its protagonists face different types of adversity.

the way: we do no more than follow on, giving it, of course, the experience of the present process)<sup>18</sup>

At the time, La Carpa was deliberately distanced from the centre of activity of the new generation of which her children, Angel and Isabel, were key protagonists. That centre was their club in the centre of the city, La Peña de los Parra (Carmen 340), at which Violeta performed on her return from Europe in 1965, adding to the huge success of this vibrant, successful and accessible music venue. According to Patricio Manns Violeta “comenzó a presidir la fantástica asamblea del canto de la calle Carmen” (began to preside over the fantastic gathering for song in Carmen), but the work that she started there as a guide and mentor for the young songwriters was cut short by her move to La Reina.<sup>19</sup> There is an interesting disjuncture in this part of the story. In some ways, her work had reaped success: it had contributed to creating a new generation of singers and it is significant that her two greatest pupils, her children Angel and Isabel, were driving forces of the new Chilean song. Yet this was not where she saw herself as belonging. Paula Miranda Herrera says that Violeta Parra had come back to a “no-lugar”, a no place, in which her children were acting independently of her, the first stage of the folklore revival had succeeded in finding a place for popular song in Chile, and her new plans did not fit into an environment that she did not fully recognise.<sup>20</sup> In her *Décimas*, Violeta Parra had dramatized another return to Chile, after the two years (1954-56) in Europe, when she can find no evidence of her life there before and her home is abandoned to “crickets and spiders”, who along with a butterfly are her only interlocutors. She has lost her youngest daughter, “taken by God” during her time away, and her older children take time to embrace her fully again. In this return to the “ruins” of her past

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<sup>18</sup> Subercaseaux et al, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Manns, 68

<sup>20</sup> Paula Miranda Herrera, *La poesía de Violeta Parra* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2013) 98.

life it is song that will help her to face the world again and maintain them financially. In this previous experience dislocation we find her sense of loss overcome by the determination to go on, in the certainty that her coffin, as she says, is still far away.<sup>21</sup> Ten years later this ability to fight back that is harder to locate, the feeling of solitude that is harder to combat and the sense of her mortality intense.

Angel says that his mother moved to La Reina because she wanted to feel the earth beneath her feet, and Isabel relates her mother's distaste for their perceived bourgeois lifestyle, for which she would, violently at times, denounce them:

A veces con liviandad y otras con enorme violencia, nos reprochaba a nosotros, sus hijos, nuestra forma de vida aburguesada. Discutíamos. Decía: "Vámonos todos a la Reina con maridos, yerna, nietos, y animalitos, el lujo es una porquería, los seres humanos se consumen sumergidos en problemas caseros.

(Sometimes gently and sometimes with enormous violence, she would reproach us, her children, about our bourgeois way of life. We'd argue. She'd say: 'Let's all go to La Reina, husbands, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, animals, luxury's a load of nonsense, human beings eat themselves up submerged in household problems.)<sup>22</sup>

The space she sought out was one that would allow her to resist incorporation into systems that would absorb only what was deemed digestible. She refused to be part of a cultural environment that saw her work as the last agonic remnants of Chilean folklore; her aim was to share the work of the artist Violeta Parra. It is this disjuncture that made the place for her artistic expression become a type of 'site of exile',<sup>23</sup> to use the expression of Leónidas

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<sup>21</sup> Violeta Parra, "Cuando regreso al país", *Décimas. Autobiográficas en verso* (Santiago: Editorial Sudamericana), 183.

<sup>22</sup> Isabel Parra, 142

<sup>23</sup> Leónidas Morales T, "La génesis de su arte", in *Violeta Parra. La última canción* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2003), 48.

Morales, lost in the counterpoint between rural and urban cultures, between Europe and Latin America, between unchanging form and innovation.

It is a complex question of location that informs the nature of La Carpa. Violeta Parra resisted domestication, and that included any domestication of her complex art within structures that only admitted her in limited ways. At the heart of the enterprise of La Carpa was a deep sense of the need for marginality from national and domesticated structures that had, in her experience, failed to recognise and act on the importance of the folk and popular art of the country as a deep expression of national letters and history. She had not come back Chile to adopt an exoticising Europeanised gaze, but to put a multi-faceted artistic project to the test. La Carpa, for both personal and public reasons, became a solitary enterprise, a place of resistance shaped by her particular experience of exclusion. What was not possible—the space that did not exist—was for one in which her country would hear and respond to her voices and be given the opportunity to effect change. That she was rendered saint-like in her afterlife has prompted the scathing description by Juan Andrés Piña of Chile as “un país de necrófilos” (a country of necrophiliacs), noting that Violeta was “desdeñada, ignorada, esquivada como una maldición” (disdained, ignored and avoided like a curse).<sup>24</sup> There is a type of violence in occupying this space between fame and invisibility, a space between great success and deep failure and hardship.

When Violeta Parra opened La Carpa de la Reina she had a sense of possibility, responsibility, artistic worth and legacy. The location of La Carpa was a complex culmination of the elements that made up her life at that moment, and which we have noted as spontaneous and the FISA project, the failure of the relationships related to that project, and the fact that the plot offered was, in fact, the only space available (the great folklorist and

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<sup>24</sup> Juan Andrés Piña, *Violeta Parra. 21 son los dolores. Selección y prologo de Juan Andrés Piña* (Santiago: Editorial Aconcagua), 24.

friend Margot Loyola talks of her going from place to place,<sup>25</sup> and Isabel says she threw herself into asking half of Santiago to collaborate with her<sup>26</sup>). But this was, above all, an active and radical act. The impulse to create La Carpa made absolute artistic sense for Violeta Parra, as she stated in an interview with René Largo Farías:

Yo creo que todo artista debe aspirar a tener como meta el fundirse, el fundir su trabajo en el contacto directo con el público. Estoy muy contenta de haber llegado a un punto de mi trabajo en que ya no quiero siquiera hacer tapicería ni pintura, ni poesía, así suelta. Me conformo con mantener la carpa y trabajar esta vez con elementos vivos, con el público cerquita de mí, al cual yo puedo sentir, tocar, hablar e incorporar a mi alma.

(I believe that all artists should aspire to have fusion as their goal, fusing their art in direct contact with the public. I'm very happy to have got to a point in my work where I don't even want to make tapestries, or write poetry, all on their own. I'm okay with having my Carpa and working at this moment with live elements, with the public near me, that I can feel, touch, talk to and incorporate it into my soul.)<sup>27</sup>

These much-quoted words take us to the heart of the artistic ambition of La Carpa, and of its inevitable failure. Patricio Manns underlines her need for fierce and real engagement with her audience:

”Se trata” decía, “de crear mucho y profundamente, y de entregar estas creaciones en caliente a aquellos para quienes han sido forjadas. La mayor penuria del creador es hacer y guardar lo hecho en cajones. El creador no debe mendigar jamás la oportunidad de ser oído.”

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<sup>25</sup> Margot Loyola, in *La Carpa. Un sueño violeta*.

<sup>26</sup> Isabel Parra, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Subercaseaux 1982, 79.

(“This,” she would say “is about creating a lot and deeply, and giving these creations while they are still hot to the people for whom they have been forged. The greatest poverty for the creator is something and keeping what is made in boxes. The creator must never beg for the opportunity to be heard).<sup>28</sup>

Her demand is for what Peter Brook would call immediate theatre: “the theatre in the arena where a living confrontation can take place. The focus of a large group of people creates a unique intensity”.<sup>29</sup> The failure of La Carpa is located in this very place, in this ambition to forge an actively engaged audience for whom the spectacle is specifically prepared. This is also why La Carpa an empty space that would remain empty, for it remained a living performative space in potential only. “I can take an empty stage and call it a bare stage,” says Peter Brook,<sup>30</sup> and that is what she sought to do, to conjure a bare stage from inhospitable land and imbue it with the possibilities of performance, of life. It is what she had done all her life and I am sure that she expected it to work.

It is this misjudgement that makes La Carpa the radical dislocation of a woman who wanted her art to be the conduit for the popular art and folklore of Chile that she had spent her life sharing with different audiences the length of the country and abroad, making visible music and musical forms that had been invisible between communities. In an interview for Radio Universidad de Concepción in 1958, Violeta said that less than ten per cent of Chileans knew their own folk music and that she felt as if she needed to go “battling door by door, window by window”, as if she was just starting out.<sup>31</sup> The potential power of La Carpa lay in the force of her ability to carry on battling, relying on the strength of belief and character that was recognised by the Peruvian writer, José María Arguedas: “Era una fuerza que se hallaba

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<sup>28</sup> Manns, 69

<sup>29</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 112.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> “Violeta Parra en Radio Universidad de Concepción”, interview with Mario Céspedes, 1958.

cargada de una conciencia sumamente lúcida de su propio valer” (She was a force that was charged with a supremely lucid awareness of her own worth).<sup>32</sup> Yet, La Carpa could not work by the force of her will alone, and, without entering too insistently into biographical interpretations for its failure—her fragility at this stage (there was at least one serious suicide attempt)—could not sustain her enterprise, which was finally solely driven by the force of her ego, her desire, her passion. Her manner of achieving her Popular University for Folklore remained illegible and incomprehensible to others, and the evidence of a woman *in extremis*, unconventional, outrageous and illocatable prevailed over the possibility of seeing an artist capable of realising a grand project at national level. As Angel Parra says: “nadie se atrevió a seguirla en esta locura” (nobody dared to follow her in this madness).<sup>33</sup>

Being alone in this enterprise turned out to be too difficult. Above all, and disastrously, it was necessary for audiences to come to her, to engage with the project fully on her terms, as “live elements” that she could “incorporate into her soul”. There is no mystery in the statement that all performers need an audience, but there is agony in its absence, in “the greatest poverty of the creator”, who cannot find one. This is a desire and a need that could not be fulfilled regardless of the relentless and all-consuming energy of Violeta Parra. There is a passage in a letter to her ex-lover, Gilbert Favré, who had left for Bolivia where he would set up his own *peña*, which describes a successful evening in La Carpa:

El sábado tuve 150 personas en la carpa. Tenemos comida para el público: asaditos, empanadas fritas, sopaipillas pasadas, caldo, mate, café, mistela y música. Si vendiéramos la “fondue” sería un éxito.

Todo el mundo tomando mate en la carpa.

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<sup>32</sup> Isabel Parra, *El libro mayor de Violeta Parra*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Epple and Parra, 125.

Hice un brasero redondo en la tierra alrededor del palo central, bien grande. Diez teteritas, y muchos fierros llenos de carne. ¡Qué maravilla es mi carpa ahora!

(On Saturday I had 150 people in La Carpa. We have food for the public: roasts, *empanadas*, pasties, broth, *mate*, *mistela* and music. If we sold fondue it would be a great success.

Everybody drinking *mate* in La Carpa.

I made a round stove in the earth around the central pole, really big. Ten kettles, and lots of grilles full of meat! How marvellous my Carpa is now!)<sup>34</sup>

In this picture, which was not repeated often (and certainly not enough for success), Violeta projected the ideal of her perfect audience, nurtured in her care, creating community and in the environment she had created. This is an audience that might in fact have existed, but that simply could not exist where she planted La Carpa. The audience had a huge responsibility put upon them: to make the journey to join her and then be what she wanted them to be.

When they did not perform to her expectations, the audiences could bring out the fiercely unforgiving side of her artistic being, as Sergio Larraín describes: “Cuando Violeta se daba cuenta que estaba entre un público snob se volvía tremendamente agresiva, casi provocadora”

(When Violeta realised she was performing for a snobbish audience, she would become tremendously aggressive, provocative even)<sup>35</sup> and there are many anecdotes about her uninhibited behaviour, which constantly challenged social norms. But, the audience, having made the journey, is an element that, once in La Carpa could not be controlled, as Peter Brook points out:

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<sup>34</sup> Isabel Parra, 142

<sup>35</sup> Subercaseaux et al, 83

Once within a theatre an audience cannot whip itself into being “better” than it is. In a sense there is nothing a spectator can actually do. And yet, there is a contradiction here that cannot be ignored, for everything depends on him.<sup>36</sup>

Too much depended on the complicity of the perfect imagined audience. La Carpa was a utopic and dystopic place, a place of “perfección imperfecta” (imperfect perfection).<sup>37</sup> Rather than being a place of community it became in part what Violeta loathed most—a place for a social event, a “noche de gala”, a point on a tourist itinerary, and Margot Loyola comments on the presence of “muchísima intelectualidad” (a lot of intellectuals).<sup>38</sup> That the only audience that could reach her space was a privileged audience rendered her project void of meaning, because these people were void of the desire she respected and by which she needed to be nourished. How was this audience to hear and respond actively to the deep connection to the popular poetic structures from which her work sprang? La Carpa became emptied of the shared lived experience of recognition and learning. It was trapped in an imaginary space that was bound by real ideological and cultural structures that she vehemently rejected, as symbolic confirmation of an unchanging past. In contrast, Violeta Parra imagined a place that would be open to the future in a utopian projection of true recognition of the popular, the indigenous, the “authentic” of her country, cultures that, as she herself wrote into her songs and poetry. Cultures whose protagonism in the was chronically undervalued in a historic continuity of dismissal of the artistic and social values embodied in the music and art created by the poor, the impoverished, marginalised and feared sectors of her country. For Violeta, the relationship with popular culture was more than a gesture of political solidarity across classes. La Carpa was a place of imminence, “the place from where we catch sight of things

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<sup>36</sup> Brook, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Manns, 23

<sup>38</sup> Margot Loyola, in *La Carpa. Un sueño Violeta*.

that are just occurring”,<sup>39</sup> proclaiming what could be, but that was not “seeable” or legible at the time.

At this stage in her career, Violeta Parra had become unaccustomed to such levels of invisibility and she feared that she was losing the power of her artistic voice. In this sense, at the heart of this whole enterprise is Violeta’s own crisis: La Carpa became for her a place of abandonment, loss of love, conviction of isolation. Yet, still, Violeta lived La Carpa as the imminent expression of her artistic self. This veered, it seems, from frenetic activity to deeply immobilising despair, from performing in front of reasonable audiences whom she also fed and nurtured to performances for single figures, or even for nobody. Carmen Luisa remembers knowing that on those occasions Violeta would spend sleepless nights wondering what had gone wrong.<sup>40</sup> Her trip to Punta Arenas in 1966 on the “Chile canta y ríe” tour organised by René Largo Farías was a type of return to her what she perceived as her real public, audiences she would identify with simplicity, understanding of her work and the desire to be “incorporated into her soul”. These were audiences in which people saw that she was cold and gave her a woollen shawl, or that her feet did not reach the floor, and so made her a properly proportioned stool so that she could sit and play with her feet on the ground.<sup>41</sup> The antithesis of this was the emptiness of La Carpa, whose largely urban and foreign audience could not nurture and sustain her in similar ways. This is the crisis that was the greatest danger of La Carpa, for there was no constant audience with which to forge this relationship, because in fact the audience had to be made and formed; it could not be accessed naturally.

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<sup>39</sup> Néstor García Canclini, *Art beyond Itself. Anthropology for a Society without a Story Line* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Subercaseaux et al, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Isabel Parra, 143.

The Chilean group Chagual, who had covered some of Violeta Parra's songs, were invited to La Carpa as artists, and became her pupils, in what they called an "aprendizaje espartano" (Spartan apprenticeship). Arturo San Martín recalls her forcing them to practise until their fingers bled, and then finally telling them to be set free: "El canto es un pájaro sin plan de vuelo, que odia las matemáticas y ama los remolinos" (Song is a bird with no flight plan that hates maths and loves whirlwinds).<sup>42</sup> Patricio Manns suggests that, "[p]ara escribir como Violeta sería necesario, primero, cometer sus mismos aparentes errores, sus descuidos métricos, la flojedad de ciertas rimas" (to write like Violeta it would be necessary first to commit the same apparent errors, her careless meters, the weakness of certain rhymes).<sup>43</sup> This insight has the taste of her process with Chagual, who were put through the experience of exposing their faults and being corrected before being allowed "free". This is a perfect example of the demand of "oficio", of command of the art, of artistry, accompanied by the need for the work of rehearsal, repetition, apprenticeship. In order to be set free as artists, and for creativity to soar without limits, the artist had to serve an apprenticeship. It is in this creative process of repetition and development that we see Violeta Parra's "oficio", her craft and skill. La Carpa was set up also to provide this service of apprenticeship, to be the place in which her command of her craft would create the space for her own freedom and for the formation of new artists and new audiences.

Yet, in some ways Violeta achieved her goals because, in her own words, she produced what she considered her best compositions there: "Gracias a la vida", "Volver a los diecisiete" and "Run Run se fue al norte",<sup>44</sup> all included in the ambiguously named *Las últimas composiciones de Violeta Parra*, either the latest or the last compositions of Violeta Parra). In the words of Paula Miranda Herrera:

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<sup>42</sup> Subercaseaux 1982, 87

<sup>43</sup> Manns 1987, 76

<sup>44</sup> Subercaseaux, 94.

Cada canción, dependiendo de su temática es una verdadera declaración de principios en cada uno de los ámbitos que le compete. Encontramos aquí su poética del amor expresada de manera profunda y compleja; su poética de la canción social y redentora, su conciencia indígena, su vínculo en etapa de madurez con el canto a lo poeta, en dos expresiones fundamentales: el canto a lo divino y la cueca.

(Each song, depending on its theme, is a real declaration of principles in each of the areas that concern her. Here we find her poetics of love, expressed in a profound and complex way; her poetics of social and redemptive song, her indigenous consciousness, her link in her maturity with popular song, in two key forms of expression: the song of the divine and the *cueca*.)<sup>45</sup>

The vein that runs through the album is the heart-rending battle between loss of love and the worth of life of the artist in solitude. The command of the language of the popular poet fused with the sensibility of the singer-songwriter provide a profound insight into how the absence of great love invalidated all else for her. The popular languages of the divine and the human are crafted into songs that turn on the life forces of love, purity, commitment, authenticity, honesty, and the tension between happiness and devastation (“dicha y quebranto”). In “Maldigo del alto cielo” she damns everything that has invalidated her life, including the word love because of betrayal, and the refrain asks over and over again how deep her pain must be for her condemn life so vehemently.

This sense of loss is what made La Carpa “fail” in such devastating fashion..She needed the audience to come to her, enter her world, abandon the centre, and audiences could not and did not travel in that direction. She sought the margin, chose the margin as her place, as the natural, historical space of the poor uneducated woman but it was a mistaken margin for her

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<sup>45</sup> Miranda Herrera, 102-03.

and she became one with a doomed space. Her daughter Carmen Luisa says how, on a night of torrential rain, as she fought to save the tent from the elements: “mi mamá estaba igual que La Carpa: hecha jirones, tenía una pena horrible” (my mother was just like La Carpa: in pieces. She felt terrible pain).<sup>46</sup> This was part of the physical everyday battle to survive in that environment. The space where she set up La Carpa meant a growing experience of loss, and La Carpa, with its isolation, was a physical and unmanageable confirmation of her being bereft of love and community, of the potential for the practice and performance of her art. There was no palpable evidence that she was mothering a new generation across the country, as she saw it her duty and responsibility to do. It was only after her death that she began to be recognised as the great creator that she was, and for whom it may well have been worth making the journey to La Reina, to share in the “este macrocosmos personal, intolerable, radiante” (this personal, intolerable and radiant macrocosm) that was Violeta Parra.<sup>47</sup> At the end, La Carpa was a violent experience of desolation that she could no longer inhabit: “se mató de un disparo con un revolver que había traído de Bolivia para defenderse de los maleantes de la Carpa” (she shot herself with a revolver she had brought from Bolivia to defend herself from the criminals around La Carpa).<sup>48</sup> La Carpa was to have been an offering to Chile, but the conditions never came right for this transformative impulse to be more than spontaneous, precarious and ultimately destructive.

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<sup>46</sup> Subercaseaux 1982, 84

<sup>47</sup> Manns, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Isabel Parra 1985, 144.