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President Bachelet's body in the Chilean press:

Anxieties of gender, fantasies of race, desires for Modernity.

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The paper I am presenting today deals with discourses and representations of national identity in Chile, exploring how race and gender function as markers for bodies within processes of nation building. Particularly, I am interested in the way women's bodies are represented as metaphorical boundaries of the nation, and how they are deemed proper or improper according to hegemonic discourses. In this way, taking as a starting point some Chilean press responses to the election of Michelle Bachelet as President, I discuss how gendered and racialised notions of nation and modernity are mobilized in the current context. I understand discourses as sites where power is articulated, reproduced and also contested; and race and gender as dimensions that are historically, socially and culturally signified; and therefore are fluid and dynamic, rather than “natural” attributes that each person has. I draw from anti-racist and postcolonial feminists analyses of nation-building that define them as constant processes of narration that are at the same time gendered and racialised, to suggest that the anxieties and hopes around Bachelet's body's race and sexuality, are metaphors of broader preoccupations and concerns about the nation's whiteness, modernity and the properness of national bodies in the new world order. I describe the three elements that characterize these discourses found on the press as *anxieties of gender, fantasies of race, and desires for Modernity*. I chose these psychoanalytical language of anxieties, fantasies and desires to denote processes that are not fully rational or originated/located in the individual; but rather in the transindividual realms of Language and history.

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Anxieties of gender

As many of you already know, in January 2006, Michelle Bachelet, a socialist single mother of three, and a doctor, also an atheist, and the candidate of the center-left coalition of parties, became the first woman President in Chile, after 57 years of the legal gain for Chilean women's right to vote. This provoked a myriad reactions, and during the Presidential campaign period, from both conservative and more progressive points of view, many press articles talked about the issues and challenges that having a woman President would raise. The following piece, from the TV news program of the Chilean Catholic University broadcast corporation, touches on a question that was being discussed daily in TV shows, radio programs, printed and Internet press: *what was going to happen to all the formal instances of power where having a male and married President seemed so natural and necessary?*

Having a woman for the first time in charge implies changes. Should we refer to her as *Presidente* or *Presidenta*?

What happens with the protocol and who will perform as the first lady? (...) The A Diplomat Academy expert explained that “*la Presidenta* can designate a Minister to perform the functions of the (President's) spouse”. But the first lady is not only is not for the (President's) company, but also is in charge of directing social and childhood issues...what will now happen to them? (italics to denote the Spanish gendered expressions).

The anxieties expressed here were around Bachelet's gender and also sexuality (apparently a heterosexual mother, but single) which unsettled the traditional image of the nation, whose citizenship was historically defined as male, so the question “what will happen to them?” seems to echo as “what will happen to us with these perversion of the natural order of things?”. The fact that she does not have a “traditional household” in this sense, is a great source of anxiety and questions like these were found daily as many considered just unthinkable the idea of a woman president, as the nation's imaginary relies on the respectable heterosexual family, where women are idealized as morally superior and guardians of the nation, while any political agency is denied. Likewise, the national imaginary seems to be constructed around a very pronounced hypermasculinity, enforced and reinforced by stereotypes and everyday as well as institutionalized discourses and practices. One of the ways to construct this hypermasculinity is the dissemination of a normative heterosexual desire, the display of homophobic language and discourses,

and the performance of a hyper-femininity to couple this image. In this sense, since her election, the press systematically has tried to depict President Bachelet's body on its inadequacy, making constant references to her being “too masculine”, “fat”, and “badly dressed”. It needs to be mentioned that in general, the press constantly looks for the moments of ridicule in all figures of authority, specially because in Chile authority has had violent effects on the national bodies². But also here lies the attempt to mark the gender inadequacy of the female body in a masculine world of political power. This is also evident in the highly gendered arguments to detract Bachelet that have emphasized her lack of leading capacity and have defined her authority as “weak”. Furthermore, for the first time we have a president that other politicians and the press jokingly call “Fatty”. The anxieties about having a woman president and the crisis of traditional masculinities is best summarized in a press column by the (moderately leftist) Chilean writer Pablo Huneeus, who makes a desperate call to men to reinstate the natural order of things: “Where are the men in this country, that the women have taken over *La Moneda* (the Presidential palace) and the fags have taken over TV?” he asks.

Fantasies of race

On the other hand, Chilean's fantasized whiteness as “the British of South America”, relies on excluding practices of delimiting the racialised “Other”, and on the reproduction of complex hierarchies of racialised and classified bodies that take place in everyday life settings. In this sense, the press articles I reviewed exalt the features of her perceived whiteness, also defined by her place in the social structure. And for Chileans, indeed, there is already an imaginary association of Bachelet with the European world: her French last name, her blond hair, her mastering of the German language, her German education-in-exile.

Let us remember, as Radcliffe points out, that Latin America has longer postcolonial periods of nation building, because of early independence processes in these countries, where the liberal notion of

² See Mbembe, A. (2001). “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly” in *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, University of California Press. Pages 103-141.

citizens with equal rights, was claimed, while, I quote “in practice social and ethnic divisions gave widely differing experiences for whites, blacks, and Indians under creole nationalisms” unquote (*Indian* here is used to emphasize the way indigenous peoples are defined in colonial discourse). The process of creating and sustaining the newly developing nations as imagined communities among such heterogeneous scenarios are very complex, and debates on identity are still highly contentious in Latin America, specially around issues of indigeneity. In Chile, the democratic transition and reconstruction (from the 1990's and on) has been articulated around the construction of a common national identity marked by economic success, the symbolic “whitening” of the country's past³, the alignment with modern states and liberal democracies, and a general identification with the West -specially in regards to the late anti-imperialist spirit of Venezuela, Bolivia, and to some degree, Brazil- *vis à vis* the United States new war on/of terror and neo-expansionist policies. In the arising of the re-edited image of an insurgent Latin America, marked by Chiapas, Oaxaca, Chavez, Evo Morales and the new indigenous transnationalism of the millenium, Chile has been extremely careful not to “take sides” and remain “neutral”, by both affirming its sovereignty within Latin America, and its implied loyalty to the Empire and to the new world order. Bachelet as the successful middle-class, professional, independent and *blond* woman she is, performs whiteness by her position of privilege *vis a vis* other women in Chile, thus her representation as metaphor of the nation is consistant with the fantasies of being represented as a non-indigenous white country.

Desires for Modernity

Women's bodies have been a recurrent metaphor for the nation's modernity in many different postcolonial contexts, as the markers of the degree of modernity versus tradition of a national society. During Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1989) for instance, “woman” and “the family” were placed as metaphors for the moral reconstruction of the Nation, and traditional family values were opposed to the “Marxist cancer”, as it was described by supporters of the military government, who defined the coupe

³Moulian, T. Chile Actual: Anatomia de un Mito. Santiago de Chile: LOM-Arcis, 1997.

as a “surgical operation” to remove the contaminated (foreign) part of the Nation's body. The exaltation of a traditional femininity was presented as a value that would save the nation from a moral degeneration. According to Grau and others, during the transition conservative forces re-mobilized the image of “the Chilean woman” as the defender of the family and a moral reservoir for the nation. The colonial disciplining of bodies, influence of the Spanish Catholic church, still prevails, and colonial discourses of gender still operate in a way that women's bodies, lives and health are subsumed under the preservation of the heterosexual family. Moreover, the Chilean project of modernity is in tension with Catholic fundamentalist notions of family, sexuality and whiteness. In these discourses, modernity is also perceived as foreign, and as a threat to the nation's values. Following Sahgal and Yuval-Davis (1992), we could argue that Catholic religious fundamentalisms, as all fundamentalisms, activate precisely in these moments that are perceived as moral crisis, represented by the “foraneus modernity”. For instance, during the same period after the National Woman's Service creation, when the state was discussing timidly about “women's rights” and “gender equality” (1990s), the Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Santiago issued a “Carta Pastoral” (Pastoral Letter), denouncing and warning about the moral crisis (expressed in the emergence of delinquency, drug consumption and permissive sexual behaviour) in Chilean society; calling for the defense of family and “Chilean values”, facing the moral corruption observed in other countries.

In conclusion

I argued that press responses to Bachelet's election express gender anxieties, in the sense that the female body is deemed as “improper” and subject to a permanent scrutiny, as the public sphere and political citizenship has been defined as male and heterosexual. I also pointed out that because European whiteness is equated to modernity by colonial prevailing discourses, Chilean social imaginary is articulated on fantasies of being white and the complete denial and obliteration of the country's indigenous identity. I also suggested that the Chilean project of becoming a modern nation is still highly linked to Catholic notions of family, sexuality, and white superiority. These notions articulate discourses

on Chile's whiteness in the nation's narrativization as a modern developing state. In sum, national identities are constituted simultaneously by the articulation of gender, class and race boundaries, and thus the importance of the bodies and their performance to affirm this national identity, as bodies are at the same time regulated by norms of “properness”, that include whiteness and heterosexuality among other standards.