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Reconsidering the Patagonian Worker Movements of the 1920s: Francisco Coloane's and Luis Sepúlveda's Rebellious Chilotes

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The largest rural strike movement in Argentina's history shook Argentine Patagonia between 1920 and 1922. The strikes began in the town of Río Gallegos, and the movement then expanded until work was stopped throughout a large area. The cycle of strikes ended when the Argentine army massacred a few hundred workers with the support of local landowners. The strikers dreamed of fair pay and better conditions for the workers of various Patagonian industries, including employees of ranches, meat processing plants, hotels, and restaurants. They were an international community that included individuals from many countries, including a number of European anarchists, but the largest group of migrant workers were Chilean and many of them were Chilotes. The Chilotes came from Chiloé, an island in southern Chile with significant Spanish settlement and mestizaje dating from the sixteenth century. They were sustenance farmers and fisherman on the island and would venture into Patagonia for seasons to generate extra income, often leaving their families behind.

The events of the strikes and those who participated in them have been portrayed in many different types of texts, including Osvaldo Bayer's article "Los vengadores de la Patagonia trágica" and history books, *Los vengadores de la Patagonia trágica* and *La Patagonia rebelde*, Bruce Chatwin's travel chronicle *In Patagonia*, Luis Sepúlveda's

travel chronicle *Patagonia Express*, and Francisco Coloane's short story "De cómo murió el chilote Otey". In my analysis of these works I strive to follow María Rosa Olivera-Williams's suggestion for reading texts that portray a specific historical period with, "the ethical consideration of listening to all of the narratives [...] cognizant of their differing motivations, desires, tonalities, and subjective trajectories. Only by paying close attention to the polyphony of voices and documents about the past [...] can we achieve a true sense of historicity" (43). Building on this idea of the importance of considering the multiplicity of voices to be heard within different genres of historical narrative, I argue that while all of the aforementioned versions of the events favor the workers' movement over the land and business owners, Sepúlveda's and Coloane's texts are unique in that they foreground the most forgotten individuals who took part in this conflict, the Chilote workers. They show the Chilotes wanting to participate in the movement and not just blindly following what the strike leaders told them to do. This is significant because Sepúlveda and Coloane give protagonism to a group that is often marginalized even within accounts sympathetic to the workers' movement. They portray a diverse community of workers that they hope can serve as a model, and at times warning, for others, and in this way, express their ideas about society, which go beyond the context of southern Patagonia.

While Coloane's "De cómo murió el chilote Otey" and Sepúlveda's *Patagonia Express* have been read widely in Chile and abroad, they have not been studied in relationship to the historical context of the specific Patagonian worker strikes that they portray.¹ Almost all of Coloane's works take place in Patagonia. He was originally from Chiloe and worked on a sheep estancia on Tierra del Fuego as a young man, and in his writing, he was interested in capturing both his own experience in the region and that of those he met and the stories they told. Rodrigo Suárez describes the world that Coloane creates in his works, "El mundo ficcional está poblado por los subalternos; trabajadores, peones, cazadores de focas, marineros, fugitivos, criminales, por las culturas indígenas en rápido desmoronamiento. Su espacio queda fuera de las ciudades, en el mar o en la pampa, lejos de los empresarios, reyes de la Patagonia, dueños de las estancias [...]" (n.p.). In general, critics, such as David Petreman, Homero Castillo, and Jorge Ricardo Ferrada, remark on Coloane's ability to take universal themes from

¹ Rodrigo Cánovas mentions Coloane as Sepúlveda's Chilean antecedent in the genre of adventure fiction, but then no further development of the point is given (56).

literature and incorporate them into a unique setting by focusing on migrant workers in Patagonia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

Coloane had an eclectic leftist political perspective that was not uncommon in twentieth century Chile. He was a life-long member of the Chilean Communist Party, which has a democratic tradition of participating in electoral politics. Previously, his earliest political involvement was in the Socialist-Marxist party of Punta Arenas, which included anarchists, socialists, and communists among its members at the time. Coloane shared many of the values of Luis Emilio Recabarren, founder of the Chilean Socialist Worker Party in 1912. Jaime Massardo states that elements of Recabarren's political thought came from the following diverse influences: "la perspectiva republicana, el ideal libertario, el cristianismo, la radicalidad ética, el socialismo utópico, un marxismo de cuño positivista" (52). Coloane's works model the need to help others and reject materialism. In a move away from strictly party-related debates and toward more universal values, an inclusive worker community is proposed through the focus on solidarity and on those who are left out of the benefits of economic modernization. Many of the characters in his works do not survive, which may be a warning about what can occur when capitalism advances without any limits or consideration for those who are most vulnerable.

In his works set in Patagonia Sepúlveda expresses similar ideals to his predecessor, Coloane. This is often missed by critics because throughout *Patagonia Express*, *Mundo del fin del mundo* (1989), and *Últimas noticias del sur* (2012), Sepúlveda presents Patagonia's people and natural environment as unique and exotic, including even a touch of magic realism. This combination helps him to sell his novels to an international audience that wants to see Patagonia as an exceptional place. According to Rodrigo Cánovas, in Sepúlveda's works "el lector reconstituye paisajes olvidados, paraísos que creíamos destruidos para siempre. Esta vuelta a los orígenes tiene un sentido específico: en el ámbito ideológico, las utopías de cambio social son intercambiadas por la utopía del buen salvaje americano" (55). However, by contextualizing Sepúlveda's works set in Patagonia with his clearest literary antecedent, Coloane, it becomes evident that Sepúlveda has not abandoned ideals of social change. Sepúlveda's works set in Patagonia continue to explore the need for solidarity expressed by Coloane.

Sepúlveda claims to base *Patagonia Express* on his own travels through the region, and he tells that he was inspired to travel there by reading Coloane's works and those of other authors in the documentary *Luis Sepulveda: The Writer from the End of the*

World. Silvia Casini, Jenny Haase, and Clair Lindsay have all studied the intertextuality in Sepúlveda's writing. Casini analyzes *Patagonia Express* in relationship to the idea of Patagonia, discussing its intertextuality with Chatwin's work and that of other foreign travel writers, while Haase discusses Sepúlveda's representation of utopia in Patagonia, and more specifically his intertextual relationship to Chatwin in *Patagonia Express*. Lindsay also studies the relationship between Chatwin's *In Patagonia* and Sepúlveda's *Patagonia Express* in both an article and later book chapter. One important difference that Lindsay points out between Chatwin and Sepúlveda is that in latter's text, "Chilean migrants proliferate and the expected sheepfarmers and Welsh settlers are largely absent" ("Luis Sepúlveda" 61).

Of the texts that I will analyze, Bayer's history books are the first chronologically to portray the strikes. With the exception of Coloane's story, the other works recognize their debt to him and consider his writing historically accurate, as do contemporary historians such as Susana Bandieri. Chatwin's and Sepúlveda's chapters on the strikes form part of much longer books. Thus, they focus on particular aspects relevant to the rest of their texts. Coloane's story presents the unique feature of not following Bayer as its historical source. Rather he offers a rewriting of the events through his own fictional version of the end of the movement.² In their portrayals of the strikes all of these texts highlight the extreme socio-economic divide between the ranch owners and workers.

In her work as a historian, Bandieri contrasts the living conditions for the migrant ranch workers, who slept in central bunkhouses or in shacks on remote outposts, and the frequently absent ranch owners who had comfortable houses to stay in when they visited their properties (259). As she explains, ranch workers lived difficult, semi-nomadic lives in a harsh climate (Bandieri 259). In contrast, certain ranch owners, such as the Braun Menéndez-Behety family, controlled large meat and wool processing, sale, and distribution networks on both sides of the Chile/Argentina border, which ensured profits coming in from all angles of the business (Bandieri 255). According to

² Coloane's story appears just three years after Bayer published a preliminary article on the Patagonian strikes in 1968 in *Todo es historia*. In *Los vengadores de la Patagonia trágica*, Bayer thanks those who contributed to the discussion following the 1968 publication (11). It is probably not a coincidence that Coloane published his story about the workers' movement in 1971. However, Coloane's version does not take into account the details of Bayer's historical research, nor does he mention Bayer. Consequently, whether or not Coloane read Bayer's article, his story shows his awareness of the intellectual debate that took place after its publication and engages with it creatively.

Mateo Martinic, in 1910 this extended family group controlled 2.5 million hectares, or almost 6.2 million acres, of the best herding land in southern Patagonia (2: 801).

Large-scale sheep ranching was southern Patagonia's most lucrative economic activity at this time, and the ranches needed single male workers. Marcelo Gavirati and Julio Vezub state, "Large ranches employed seasonal manpower: Chilean, Indian, and even Europeans [sic] workers who hoped to become small owners" (247). Conflicts developed between owners and workers because the sheep ranches and other businesses belonged to a privileged few. Gavirati and Vezub explain that when World War I ended:

[. . .] a decrease in the price of wool and a drop in the foreign demand for meat put an end to optimism. Working conditions became harder as the profitability of large ranch owners and merchants was threatened. Worker resistance translated into boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations organized by trade unions against a backdrop of increasing violence. (247)

As historian Carlos Vega Delgado describes, during World War I the worker movement became highly organized in Chilean Patagonia, with its organizations centered in Punta Arenas and Puerto Natales. The workers initially accomplished remarkable goals for the period, such as the mandatory eight-hour workday. With the fluidity of workers and the transnational nature of the region's businesses, the movement quickly spread to the Argentine Patagonia, where many of its organizers had already lived. Then, after World War I, clashes between workers and business owners culminated in the series of strikes in the Argentine province of Santa Cruz described in this article.³

The first stage of the Patagonian worker rebellion during the 1920-1921 Southern Hemisphere summer season was successful from the workers' point of view. The owners of the land, industries, and commerce of Patagonia asked the army and civil representatives of Hipólito Yrigoyen's government to intervene, and were disappointed when Lt. Hector Benigno Varela did not take their side in the conflict and instead forced them to sign an agreement with the workers, in which they conceded to many of their demands. The agreement mandated higher worker salaries, improved living conditions, and the right to organize. However, this agreement was not respected by the landowners, so the workers organized more strikes during the 1921-1922 Southern Hemisphere summer season. In stark contrast to the first stage of the strikes,

³ Both Bayer's *Patagonia rebelde* and Bandieri's *Historia de la Patagonia* give detailed historical accounts of the events discussed in the next few paragraphs.

in the second stage the army's actions supported the land and business owners' wishes, and the two entities often cooperated directly, which led to the massacre of many workers.

The representations of the workers' rebellions that I analyze focus primarily on the final confrontations between the army and the strikers. One of these took place on Estancia La Anita, belonging to the aforementioned Braun Menéndez-Behety family. The most important anarchist organizer of the movement, Antonio Soto, was with this group when Capt. Pedro Viñas Ibarra arrived with his troops on December 21, 1921. Most of the workers at La Anita were Chilean, and many Chilotes, and they rejected their leaders' suggestions to either build trenches with bails of wool and fight against the army or run away to the mountains and continue the strike. Most of the four to five hundred workers gathered there believed they could trust the army, judging from their experience during the first strike. Viñas Ibarra promised them that if they turned in their weapons and surrendered they would be protected. These promises were only kept for some of the workers, who were selected by the landowners as those who were most useful to them, while a hundred of the others were shot and killed. Soto and a few others escaped through the mountains and survived in Chile.

The violent repression and Soto's escape meant the end of this movement, but there was still another stronghold further north in the Deseado area. There the workers were united under the leadership of José Font, a well-known gaucho leader in the worker rebellions known as *Facón Grande*.⁴ For this group the beginning of the end was when they fought back after being shot at by the army. Lt. Varela realized his troops were out-numbered and decided to retreat and return the next day. *Facón Grande* and his men knew that he would come back with significant reinforcements, so they decided to surrender the next day at the Jaramillo train station. Without knowing what had happened at Estancia La Anita, they hoped for a positive negotiation. Then, like at La Anita, the army acted as before and shot many of the strikers, including *Facón Grande*. Somewhere between thirty and sixty workers of varied nationalities died, including many Chilotes.

The true events of the strikes and the ensuing repression were covered up and in large part forgotten outside Patagonia. Nevertheless, the workers conserved an oral history of the tragedy, and in the late 1960s Bayer began to publish his research into the

⁴ José Font's nickname, *Facón Grande*, literally means Big Knife. A *facón* is the typical dagger-like large knife used by a gaucho. [Editor's note: Font was Uruguayan, thus the reference to his being a gaucho and not a Chilean huaso.]

events in an effort to correct the historical record. Bayer supported his corrections of the historical record with archival research, artifacts, and testimonies from those who participated in the events. Since the time of the events the roles of victim and hero were manipulated according to the interests of the groups involved. Bayer strove to recover the facts in a concerted effort to rectify the bias in favor of the landowners that had existed in the official historical record until the 1960s. He generally seeks to defend the workers by showing the conditions in which they worked and to refute accusations of unjustified violence made against them.

Bayer points out that the rebellion initially allowed the workers to determine their own actions, giving them an escape from the ranching system's control over their lives. Ranch workers were often expected to work up to sixteen hours a day, six days a week. In addition, the ranches' isolated locations made it difficult for them to ever get away. According to Bayer, "Para casi todos ellos huelga significa dejar el trabajo, sentirse dueños de sí mismos, iguales a los patrones y, por sobre todo, hacer los [sic] que se le dé la gana terminando con las vallas, las prohibiciones y el sometimiento" ("La Patagonia trágica" 38). Rather than following their employers' orders, under the strike organizers' leadership they wandered from ranch to ranch in big groups, taking control of the properties and at times burning buildings. One of the strikers' techniques was to cut the fences separating the ranches so the herds would mix together ("La Patagonia trágica" 32). By literally taking away these barriers, the workers were symbolically returning the land to a former state of freedom and renewing the possibility for individual sustenance herding rather than just large scale ranching.⁵ For the Chilotes, taking control of their lives in this way can be especially symbolic because they were often treated poorly on the ranches.⁶

In spite of his clear recognition of certain acts of resistance on the part of the Chilotes, Bayer's analysis of these workers tends to see them as passive, as can be noted in his commentary on the end of the strikes. His recreation of the final events at La

⁵ Blake Allmendinger's description of the impact that barbed wire fences had on the American west provides another reason that the Patagonian ranch workers would have had to resent these barriers: "Barbed wire, invented in the 1870s and strung across the West extensively in the 1880s and afterward, enabled cattlemen to define and distinguish their stock not by branding their herds on the open range, but by confining them within fenced-off enclosures. It led ranchers to fire cowboys who were no longer needed in such large numbers to watch over and round up livestock that barbed-wire fences, instead, could incarcerate" (5).

⁶ Bayer states, "esos chilotes silenciosos acostumbrados a recibir patadas, a obedecer y agachar el lomo son los que ahora se van a dar el lujo de ejercer el derecho de decidir sobre sus propias vidas" ("La Patagonia trágica" 29-30).

Anita especially contributes to propagating an image of the Chilote workers as gullible followers of the strike leaders who, in the end, were not brave enough to follow their leaders in fighting back against the army. The workers are generally criticized for believing that the army would negotiate fairly with them at La Anita even after hearing their leader Soto's warnings. Bayer imagines the Chilotes listening to the strike leaders, "Los chilotes escuchan en silencio. De vez en cuando algunos de ellos—principalmente los que tienen la familia lejos—hacen una tímida pregunta, en voz bajita, sobre cuándo ha de terminar todo esto" ("La Patagonia trágica" 45). The strikes ended with the Argentine army committing mass killings, and Bayer describes how he imagines the Chilotes passively facing their deaths, "Esos chilotes color tierra, de mirada avergonzada, morían sin zumbido como las moscas" ("La Patagonia trágica" 49). This suggests that the Chilotes lacked valor to defend themselves or to look someone in the face. Even though Bayer makes a constant effort to expose the poor treatment that the workers received, common stereotypes about this particular sub-group of Patagonian workers persist in his work.⁷

According to Bayer at this point the only act of clear resistance on the part of the Chilotes is when a man by the last name of Mansilla tells the army leaders that he knows where Soto is hiding out and asks for permission to ride off with a group of eight other Chilotes to look for him. They never come back. Bayer reports that this act of resistance is still celebrated around 1970 when he is writing: "todavía hoy, en los fogones de la peonada chilena de las estancias santacruceñas, se oye la anécdota del paisano Mansilla y su audacia es festejada siempre a las carcajadas. Tal vez sea ésta la única revancha por la muerte de tantos de los suyos que encuentra esta sencilla gente a través de los años" (*La Patagonia rebelde* 251). While telling this story clarifies that a group of Chilotes managed to defend their lives by sneaking off and running away, Bayer does not emphasize their active participation in the fight against the army alongside Facón Grande at the Jaramillo train station.

Chatwin cites Bayer's text as an important source on the strike, and *In Patagonia* shows the Chilotes as easily persuaded by others because of their lack of political sophistication. He is particularly interested in the figure of Soto and his influence on the Chilotes, interpreting the Chilotes as initially following Soto's leadership:

⁷ Bayer wrote the script for Hector Olivera and Fernando Ayal's film *Patagonia rebelde* (1974), and while there are some important differences between Bayer's books and the film, the Chilote workers are similarly stereotyped and shown as more practical and less idealistic than the workers from other countries.

On the Chilotes his voice had the effect of unstopping the resentments of centuries. Something about his youth or messianic innocence impelled them to acts of self-sacrifice and then to violence. Perhaps they saw in him the white savior promised in their folklore. He called them to stop work and they obeyed; they even flocked to join his march. (101)

Chatwin conjectures about the Chilotes' reasons for following Soto, simplifying the events and making Soto personally into a leader of masses of Chilotes who were enchanted by him.

He also offers his interpretation of how the events ended at Estancia La Anita in the following passage, "The hardliners, led by two Germans, wanted to pile up woolbales, to turn the shed into a blockhouse and fight to the last man. But Soto said he'd run for it, said *he* was not made for dog-meat, said he'd continue in the mountains or abroad. And the Chilotes did not want to fight. They preferred to trust the word of an Argentine officer than the promises of air" (104; his emphasis). Chatwin then blames Chilote folk beliefs for their behavior, stating that this allowed them to become immutable and turn themselves in to the army to be shot. Recreating his conversation with Chilote migrant workers in Río Gallegos in the 1970s, Chatwin narrates,

When I asked about the revolution of 1920, their answers were mumbled and vague; [...] Then I asked about the sect of male witches, known on Chiloé as the *Brujería*. From what little I knew, I felt that it might explain their behaviour in 1920. 'The *Brujería*,' they smiled. 'That's only a story.' But one old man went cold and silent at the mention of the word. (107)⁸

Here Chatwin's interpretation of the events differs from Bayer's texts because the Chilotes supposedly had a chance at fighting or the option to easily escape, but instead they passively turn themselves in to the Argentine army.⁹ On the other hand, Bayer's texts contend that the workers' only hope was to turn themselves in because they would be punished with the death penalty if they escaped. However, despite these and other differences, Bayer and Chatwin have in common that they both belittle the Chilotes' role in the events while focusing on the actions of the strike leaders and the businessmen and landowners who repressed the strikes.

⁸ Folklore has traditionally been an important element of Chilote culture and includes belief in male witches, as Coloane describes extensively in his *Memorias* when talking about his childhood on the island in the early twentieth century. However, Chatwin is the only author I have found who makes this specific connection between Chilote folklore and the behavior of the Chilotes during the strike. Moreover, his association of the two seems far-fetched because he does not provide any concrete evidence or source for it, as is evident in this quote.

⁹ In this case Chatwin's version is much closer to the way that the events are portrayed in Olivera and Ayal's film than in Bayer's texts.

Sepúlveda's treatment of these events, on the other hand, gives centrality to the workers diminished in the works analyzed above. Even though Sepúlveda's chapter about the Patagonian workers' movement only takes up a few pages of his book, the title of the whole book in the Spanish edition, *Patagonia Express*, refers back to this chapter, showing its importance in the overall text.¹⁰ Sepúlveda's most direct influence—Chatwin—represents Chilote ranch hands as passive followers. However, as we will now see, Sepúlveda clearly differs from his predecessor in his portrayal of Chilotes.¹¹

In the few short pages Sepúlveda writes about the strikes, he does not get into the details of the relationships between the workers and their leaders, or who chose to stay and who to flee at the end of the movement and why, but one aspect that is evident is that the Chilote workers are the characters that he chooses to emphasize most in his account of the strikes. Sepúlveda describes the contemporary them riding the Patagonia Express train with him as strong and resistant people who have not forgotten the Patagonian worker movement. He writes that they are “hombres fuertes que, hastiados de la pobreza chilota y de la proverbial dureza de carácter de las mujeres isleñas, salen a buscar fortuna en el continente” (140). As in the past, they will not make anything resembling a fortune, and they continue to suffer from the conditions in which they live and work. Sepúlveda stresses this by commenting that many of them die from stomach cancer after a life without any fresh fruits or vegetables. Their collective memory of the movement becomes clear when Sepúlveda says that he sees them respond with “obscene gestures” upon hearing a protestant pastor also riding the train express the opinion that the repression of the strikes was justifiable. The pastor says, “Todos eran subversivos. El que los lideraba, el gallego ése, los convenció de que la propiedad era un robo. Estuvo bien que los mataran a todos. Con los subversivos no hay que tener piedad” (142). By demonstrating that this version of history is unacceptable to the workers, Sepúlveda shows that the Chilote memory of the strikes is still alive in these workers and can motivate them to action, even if that be only

¹⁰ While focusing on travel as well, the other two sections describe his political imprisonment and ensuing exile during the Pinochet dictatorship, as well as the influence that his grandfather's politics as a Spanish anarchist have had on his life.

¹¹ Although throughout his book Sepúlveda makes gestures to associate his text with Chatwin and Paul Theroux, in this section his focus on those he meets in Patagonia rather than on his own journey differs from their works. While the old Patagonia Express train takes Theroux to a place that he describes as “nowhere” and where he does not engage with its people or history, the train takes Sepúlveda to the places where the strikes took place and puts him in contact with contemporary Chilote workers for whom the memory of the strikes is still alive.

gestures on a train. During his train ride Sepúlveda also learns that another way that local people express their memory of the strikes is by keeping the Jaramillo train station clock set to the exact time when a stray bullet stilled it during the massacre of workers. The man checking tickets on the train tells him, “Lo han reparado muchas veces, pero siempre alguien se encarga de estropearlo y poner la hora que deba marcar” (142). All of this differs greatly from Chatwin’s contemporary Chilotes, who mumble when asked about the strikes and seem to want to act like they have forgotten what happened. It also counters Bayer’s idea that the repression of the strikes meant the absolute end of the worker movement in Patagonia. As we will now see, Coloane’s fiction is an antecedent for Sepúlveda’s strong Chilote characters.

Coloane’s portrayal of the final moments of the workers’ movement in his story “De cómo murió el chilote Otey” also differs from Bayer by giving protagonism to Chilote workers. Like Bayer, Coloane favors the workers, desiring to expose the abuses they have suffered and to criticize the landowners’ handling of their petitions, but the type of characters that he focuses on and the way they are portrayed differs greatly. The Chilotes are represented as resistant and brave. Coloane’s story takes place at a ranch near Lake Argentino and it is the last ranch that the workers control, which suggests that it refers to Estancia La Anita, where Soto was in charge. However, it is a hybrid version in which Facón Grande leads workers to a last stand, which more closely resembles the final historical events that took place much farther north in the Jaramillo-Tehuelches area. After sending the others away to escape through the Payne Mountains to Chile, Facón Grande chooses the group of men who have been fighting alongside him the longest to wait for Coronel Varela’s arrival at the ranch. Together they barricade themselves into a barn and shoot at the soldiers from this vantage point until they run out of ammunition, in this way resisting as long as possible and causing numerous casualties in Varela’s troops. In this version Coloane shows the workers taking the ranch, where they had suffered so much abuse, and using it as a place of resistance until the very end, rather than it being the place where they were tricked into surrendering. In addition, the men employ local techniques, such as “boleadoras, lazos y facones,” and indigenous geographical knowledge to fight the soldiers (34).

In Coloane’s story the initial meeting between the two main characters, both Chilotes, shows the frustrations that Chilote migrant workers face. Bernardo Otey has recently migrated to Patagonia to try to earn money for the wife and children he has left behind on the island, and Gabriel Rivera is a horse breaker who moved from Chiloé to Patagonia as a young boy. Rivera has changed so much in his transformation into a

Patagonian gaucho that he has to confess to Otey that he is from Chiloé; Otey does not guess this upon meeting him. He has no family and comments that the only women he has ever been with are prostitutes. Rivera belongs to the group whose duty it is to remain with Facón Grande and fight to the death, and Otey is part of the group that is supposed to escape, yet, surprisingly, Otey decides to come back and fight with the others. Despite Otey not heeding his advice, Rivera, disillusioned with his life in Patagonia because of the loneliness that it implies, encourages him to get away while he can and survive to return to his wife and children. Rivera initially came to Patagonia as a child with an uncle who was a sheepshearer. His uncle told him that Patagonia was a place for the good life, where people rode big horses and ate roast lamb every day. Although as a horse breaker working by contract rather than salary Rivera has a level of income and independence that the average ranch worker does not enjoy, his description of his life shows that he is so alone that he does not feel attached to life:

He ganado buena plata domando potros, soy bastante libre, pero . . . fuera de las ñatas que uno baja a ver de vez en cuando a Río Gallegos o Santa Cruz, no se sabe lo que es una mujer para uno, ni lo que sería un hijo... ¿De qué vale la plata entonces, si uno no ha de vivir como Dios manda? El corazón se le vuelve a uno como esos champones de turba: lleno de raíces, pero tan retorcidas y negras que no son capaces de dar una sola hebra de pasto verde... Por eso será que uno no tiene mucho apego a esta vida tampoco, y se hace el propósito como si no valiera nada... Da lo mismo terminar debajo del lomo de un arisco o en una huifa como esta en que nos hallamos metidos. (42-43)

This passage shows the hopelessness that characterizes Coloane's ranch workers in this story and other works. Yet these difficulties, far from leading them to disillusionment, motivate the Chilotes in this story to participate in the strikes.

Otey's decision to take an active role in defending the worker movement counters the traditional stereotype of Chilotes as meek followers. Rivera explains to Otey where he thinks the Chilote stereotype in Patagonia comes from: "es que son bastante apatronados...y se vuelven matreros cuando hay que decidirse por las huelgas, aunque después son los primeros en estirar la poruña para recibir lo que se ha ganado" (41). At the same time, Rivera admits that he understands why the Chilotes are sometimes suspicious of strikes. He knows that they have often already committed the money they will earn that season to supporting their families or to paying off debts. Otey won a bet with Rivera before leaving for the mountains, but he soon begins to feel guilty about taking the other man's money and leaving him behind to protect the group that is escaping, so he returns to give him back his money. When he arrives back at the ranch, one of the cowboys' remarks on his deference to others in this action,

saying, “¡Chilote tenía que ser!” (39). Otey defends himself saying that returning the money was not the only factor; he also feels compelled to finish what he started by joining the movement. Upon his return to the ranch, he expresses to Facón Grande his desire to fight with this group, “era lechero en la estancia Primavera cuando empezó la revuelta. Después me metí en ella y aquí estoy; quiero pelearla hasta el final, si ustedes me lo permiten” (40). In this statement, he shows the respect for authority that is stereotypically Chilote in these works. On the other hand, he is asking permission to bravely fight to the end. The men decide to let him stay. Throughout his works, Coloane promotes a pro-worker stance through the dilemmas that many of his characters’ face: they must decide whether to think about the good of their community or class or to only look out for their own interests. The workers, such as Otey, that choose to help others are celebrated.

Otey’s sacrifice at the end of the story shows the combination of bravery and concern for others that characterizes Coloane’s Chilotes. Not only can Rivera as a Chilote-turned-hyper-masculine gaucho horse breaker be brave, but so can Otey the dairy worker. During the battle with Lt. Varela’s troops they are both taken prisoner, and then they are selected to be shot by a firing squad. When they are about to die, Otey manages to save Rivera’s life by confusing the soldiers and making them all shoot at him. This causes him to be shot instantly, but gives Rivera a chance to ride off to the mountains where the others are hiding out. Coloane’s story gives the following description of Otey’s dramatic defiance when about to be shot by Lt. Varela’s firing squad:

el sargento que los comandaba se acercó y comenzó a prender con alfileres, en el lugar del corazón, un disco de cartón blanco para que los soldados pudieran fijar sus puntos de mira. Una vez que lo hizo, se apartó a un lado y desde un lugar equidistante desenvainó su curvo sable y lo colocó horizontal a la altura de la cabeza. Iba a bajar la espada dando la señal de “¡fuego!”, cuando Bernardo Otey dio una manotada sobre su corazón, arrancó el disco blanco y arrojándose por los ojos a los fusileros les gritó: “¡Aprenden a disparar, mierdas!” (48)

Otey’s final actions show that even the most respectful, meek Chilote can be brave, loyal, and capable of standing up for workers’ rights. Although he dies, he accomplishes his goal of following through with his commitment to the movement and also saves the life of Rivera, perhaps showing this alienated horse breaker that he does belong to a community and can find hope in that. The narrator states that Otey’s sacrifice will be remembered. In this way, Sepúlveda’s later text seems to build on Coloane’s by insisting that the Chilote workers’ deaths have not been forgotten.

The works analyzed in this article, which are from the second half of the twentieth century, condemn the violent repression of the Patagonia worker movement. However, in comparing the works, contradictions become evident in their treatment of the groups involved in the movement and its repression. Bayer and Chatwin marginalize the Chilotes and concentrate more on the other actors in the story. This is probably because there is more in the written historical record about the strike leaders and the landowners who opposed them. On the other hand, Sepúlveda and Coloane rewrite history to give agency to the characters that the historical record has traditionally ignored, emphasizing their individuality and personal choices. In this effort Coloane is motivated by his background as a Chilote who migrated to southern Patagonia himself. While not Chilote, Sepúlveda follows in the footsteps of Coloane by focusing on exploring the difficult lives of migrant ranch workers in southern Patagonia in the section of his narration that deals with the strikes.¹² In both authors' works the characters' resistance to the landowner's hegemony comes from the pain of exploitation and their struggle to survive and is already present before the arrival of outside strike organizers. Even though most of these men's discontent and frustration ends in death on the ranch, their violent actions and the escape of a few of their companions communicates a desire to continue searching for a better, more meaningful existence beyond the limits of ranch life.

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¹² In the aforementioned documentary, Sepúlveda mentions that he started writing because he wanted to tell the kind of stories that Coloane told, and he mentions el Chilote Otey as the type of character he admired from Coloane's works (*Luis Sepulveda: The Writer from the End of the World*).

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