

Interview / Entrevista

“Silence might have its own significance”:

An interview with Daniel Borzutzky¹

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*On March 2, 2019, I interviewed Chilean-American poet and translator Daniel Borzutzky at a small café on the North Side of Chicago. Borzutzky has published five books of poetry, including *Memories of My Overdevelopment*² (2015) (which is discussed at length below), the National Book Award winning collection *The Performance of Becoming Human* (2016), and most recently, *Lake Michigan* (2018). He has also published translations of poetry collections by Huilliche-*

¹ This interview has been edited for readability.

² Borzutzky's title is a play on Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 film *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment), based on the 1965 novel of the same name by Edmundo Desnoes. The film uses an interior narrative from the decidedly ambivalent perspective of a white bourgeois Cuban who remains in Cuba after his family, which questions the efficacy of the Revolution, emigrates to the U.S. after the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Borzutzky's collection interrogates Chilean and United States-ian neoliberalism, and thus the title's change from "underdevelopment" to "overdevelopment", which signals a shift in the perspective of critique. The title critiques the neoliberal project's overdevelopment of Latin American countries based on a technological modernity and an imperial notion of progress (as development). Borzutzky's book describes the imposition of a neoliberal capitalist paradigm that reads the decimation of local lands, peoples, and cultures for the sake of extractive capital and capitalist accretion as the very project of development itself.

Mapuche poet Jaime Luis Huenún, and Chilean poet Galo Ghigliotto. In addition to a published interview with Raúl Zurita, Borzutzky has published translations of two of Zurita’s poetry collections: Canto a su amor desaparecido (1985) (Songs for his Disappeared Love (2010)) and El país de tablas (2006) (The Country of Planks (2015)). Borzutzky teaches creative writing and Latin American and Latino literature as an Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago with a joint appointment in the departments of English and Latin American and Latino Studies.

As the poet Raúl Zurita, often cited in lists of Chile’s great poets, is referenced multiple times in this interview, I offer a very brief introduction. Raúl Zurita (1950-) is one of the most acclaimed poets who has written verse in response to the Chilean dictatorship, and was himself detained and tortured. His work, which spans from just before the violent coup of 1973 to the present, is always a generative transformation of the traumas of the Chilean dictatorship and attempts to understand this trauma in relation to other state-sponsored violence of the twentieth-century around the world.

Madarieta: I wanted to start with talking about translation, which is a big aspect of your work. Not just the translation from one language to another, translation of a poem into another language, but as you talk a lot about in *Memories of My Overdevelopment*, a translation of socio-economic systems, and of violence from one geopolitical location to another. For example, in your book you say that “to translate Chile is to translate Chicago” and, that “neoliberalism translates across cultures and hemispheres and continents.” You invoke translation as a practice that can cognitively translate these continuous orders of neoliberalism, colonialism, and state violence.

I want to read the last stanza of your poem “Murmur #1”: “which brings us back to / translation, which all too often is talked about / as merely a problem of aesthetics / and not as a problem of politics / economics or violence / not as a problem of how to expose / and translate / the eternal translation / of the hollow wretchedness of / the devouring economies / of the borderless horrors / of nations” (14).

It feels like you’re saying that translation is something that will help us understand these continuous horrors across borderless nations.

Borzutzky: To start with the end there, I think the most direct way to think about those lines is to think about translation as performing a different kind of active unification. Scholars love to talk about translation in very metaphorical ways that are mainly linguistic and symbolic. There are two parts to that. The linguistic part makes translation a technical exercise. The symbolic part is the talk, the theorizing and nodding to translation that has mostly not been supported by the academy. The amount of books

that are published in translation and the recognition translators get in the academy is little. That was one way of trying to think of a different conception of translation as more directly related to the work that I was doing with Chile.

As I talk about in *Memories of my Overdevelopment*, my translating of *The Country of Planks* by Zurita coincides with these two moments, which began to crystallize this notion of the Chilean-ness of Chicago. In Chile in 2011-2012, there is a year-long teacher and student strike at the primary school, high school and college level. And they're essentially protesting the privatization of the education system in Chile, which, under Pinochet, was decimated.

Chile has something like over 70% of school age students who go to private schools. Everybody receives a voucher from the state in order to pay for schooling. Often the voucher isn't enough to send the child to a good school so people end up going way into debt just to go, not just college, but to high school. And at the same time, the Chicago Teachers Union (CU) was going on strike for the first time in 27 years. And if we take race out of the equation, the issues were very, very similar. That same year the mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel closed down 50 public schools, replacing some of them with charter schools. So, Chicago was really at the center of both a mass destruction of the public-school system. That moment in time made me think about the ways in which Chile and Chicago are interrelated.

Famously the Chilean economy under Pinochet was developed at the University of Chicago with the plan of using a military state in order to test out these extreme, extreme measures of privatization. But as the teachers in Chicago were going on strike it occurred to me that the end game wasn't Chile. The end game was Chicago. The end game was to bring it back here and, in many ways, while it was developed here, Chile was a kind of model that was being aspired to. To translate a Chilean *experience* is obviously not the same, and I'm very careful to make that distinction and try not to make that point, but it *is* to translate experiences that we are in a continuous cycle of here, at least economically.

So that was the root of that idea. And then it crystallized in a different way when the reporting about the black site of Homan Square³ came out and we were learning that the Chicago police department was disappearing people that they arrested. And again, the scale is enormously different than Chile, but there were many cases of

³ See the October 19th, 2015 *Guardian* article "[Homan Square revealed: how Chicago police 'disappeared' 7,000 people](#)".

torture reported, and there was at least one case of death reported. At Homan Square people are being arrested and not registered, and something else clicked at that moment, too. If in Chile these mass privatization policies were able to take hold, they were able to take hold because of the police state, because of the military state. Everybody was too scared to do anything about it. And I saw a similar idea in Chicago. That the neighborhoods that were being decimated the most, the neighborhoods that were losing the most public services, were also being over-policed and subjected to police violence in extreme ways. And that this policing was a way of making possible, of facilitating these economic privatization policies intended to destroy the public sector.

I began to understand both translation and my own writing in a different way. It allowed me to more easily invoke a kind of transnational idea. An idea that the writing I’m doing is taking place in multiple spaces at the same time.

Madarieta: It makes me think, too, about your translations. For example, of translating Zurita into English. The majority of readers in Chicago would likely be reading Zurita in English and would be able to understand their own circumstances and the situation in Chicago by reading Zurita’s writing about the dictatorship, but also understand his transnational conception of this continuous history of violence that you talk about in your own work. It’s about how translation is also pedagogical, and insists that we look at Chile as the test site of neoliberalism and the implementation of an all-out police state. Therefore, the intensification of neoliberal policies can be seen as another way of also understanding our own situation.

Borzutzky: Yes, in a couple of different ways. It at least asks you to understand U.S foreign policy, and to think about what it means that we’re reading about a Chile that was destroyed with the support and aid of the United States. And then it changes the resonance of that when we begin to think about the long game of Nixon and Kissinger doing this in 1973. They are thinking about economics. They’re thinking about the Cold War and they’re concerned about the spread of communism. They are setting in place policy ideas that the right was trying to enact starting in the sixties, and which now are common place.

Now we see them in Chicago Democratic positions as well. So, to be clear about it, what I’m actually saying is that the privatization schemes in Chile were being dreamed up both with the University of Chicago but also throughout the sixties by the economist from Virginia, James Buchanan, and the various other networks that were

seeking to influence legislation and policy with a very, very long term focus. Part of what I can see now is that that moment in the '70s is really the beginning of a long process of normalizing economic extremes.

Madarieta: It strikes me, the way you talk about this translation between Chile and Chicago. It seems that Chicago is kind of a metonym for the United States inasmuch as Santiago is a metonym for Chile as a whole.

Borzutzky: Because the Chicago Democratic Party has no competition, they have historically had no incentive to appease labor unions and other traditionally Democrat constituencies. And, because they did not need to compete with anybody you have the situation at the beginning of the '60s with elder Mayor Daley, where in Chicago the machine can, economically speaking, get away with much more. Because the Democrats did not have any competition they could go as far right as they wanted.

So, in that way, especially with the privatization of public schooling, Chicago does become something like a metonym for the rest of the country. Because they're able to do it in a more extreme way. Because there's not a Democratic party that is going to question it. Chicago politics is shifting now, and it certainly shifted after the Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012.

Madarieta: That makes me think that this translation between Chile and Chicago, or Chile and the United States, could also be thought of as just one iteration of other translations and continuums that have unfolded and made possible certain political and economic regimes in the United States through this history of expansive U.S. intervention economically and militarily throughout Latin America over the last 200 years.

Borzutzky: Yeah, and probably into Asia as well. Somebody who's been important to my thinking about translation has been Don Mee Choi, who translates the Korean poet Kim Hyesoon. She has a line about how the purpose of her translations of Kim Hyesoon is to expose the ways in which Korea is a neo-colony. Yes, this epigraph here which is from Don Mee, says, "My intention is to expose what a neo colony is, does to its own, what it eats and shits. Hyesoon's poetry reveals all this, and this is why I translate her work."

Don Mee and I have talked about the parallels between Chile and Korea in that regard as well. But if we shift from talking about economics to talking about disappearance, to talking about a kind of state-inflicted violence upon itself, then I do begin to see them as part of that same continuum. And you see that in Zurita’s work as well. There was a line in Zurita where Hiroshima is crossing the Chilean mountainscape. This state-inflicted violence expands outwards.

Madarieta: It makes me think of another line that you say in your acceptance speech for the National Book Award. You say “literature, but poetry specifically can act as this space for historical memory.” It seems like that in as much as this continuum of violence is borderless so are the connections that are possible within literature and poetry as a site for the workings of this transnational historic memory.

Borzutzky: I think that’s right. I’m certainly not doing a documentary poetics the way it is normally understood, but I am interested in doing a kind of documentation that is overperforming the realities of itself in a certain way. Like I say in *Lake Michigan*, I do feel like I am documenting a moment in the city’s history. But I’m doing it by inserting fiction into it as well, and by thinking about the consequences, or thinking about where the city ends up if its own performance of its own values is taken to its logical ends.

Madarieta: Can you talk about that in relation to your work as a memorial project? Your poetry as a form of historical memory?

Borzutzky: I would say that I’m thinking about memory in each book differently. In *The Performance of Becoming Human* I’m certainly thinking about documenting disappearance. And then the other documentary part of it is the post 2008 economic collapse moment where the destruction of the global economy is being played out in very individual ways. I’m thinking about the consequences for global economics on individual bodies.

Madarieta: That’s one of the reasons why your poetry is really important to my project. I think a lot about the dissonance created when you put somebody’s embodied experience and memories against national histories or state projects of remembering. There’s always this tension that’s building and it’s like, no, that’s not my experience.

And wait a second, that's not actually in the past—we say that that happened then, but it hasn't ended, has it?

Borzutzky: There's a joke about Chile that the dictatorship ended in 1990 but the transition from the dictatorship is continuous till this day. We might say it's like that because of economics in some ways, because the economic policies of the dictatorship are still very much in place in Chile. And we might also say they are still very much in place in Chicago along with the kind of police state that goes along with that. Maybe that's even worse in Chicago than it is in Chile now.

Madarieta: It appears that way, although with recent news of police murders of Mapuche who are attempting to reclaim, or even just farm their own lands... Maybe not to the same degree as far as the amount of shootings in Chicago.

Borzutzky: But I wonder about the degree of attention that those deaths receive. Maybe because it's happening to the Mapuche, because it's happening so far from the center, it's easy for it to be absorbed or not be noticed.

Madarieta: It makes me wonder about your relationship to Chile and your being Chilean-American and growing up in Chicago. I have to think that these resonances are particularly striking because of your own personal embodied experience, your own personal memories of dictatorship.

You ask Zurita in your 2009 interview with him—he was writing the *Songs for His Disappeared Love* in 1985, right in the midst of the Pinochet dictatorship—and you ask, “So I'm curious about what it's like to be an artist and a poet during those years.” I wanted to talk to you a little bit about your own early life while the dictatorship was still going in Chile, and your relationship with Chilean identity, being a poet yourself.

Borzutzky: My answer probably won't be all that satisfying, but I actually grew up in Pittsburgh and I've lived in Chicago for the last 20 years. There wasn't much of a Latin American community in Pittsburgh. We maybe knew a few other Chileans, but my parents were not nostalgic for Chile. I'm sure it was extremely difficult for them to uproot their lives when they were in their twenties and start new lives. But I never got the sense from them that they had an emotional attachment that was equated with

missing Chile, or that equated with needing to perform that nostalgia or perform a kind of longing for it in any way.

So, in many ways, I think I was probably remotely aware of the dictatorship. But I certainly became more aware of it when I was a child and would go to Chile and got a very interesting sense of the ways in which the country was very divided because people on my mother’s side of the family were very affected by the dictatorship. Actually, people on my father’s side as well. But there are also people on my father’s side of my family who very much supported the dictatorship and all of these people socialized with each other.

And that was actually what Raúl talks about in that interview a little bit, that you couldn’t have a purist position and remain in the country because there was probably no way to have a job or a social life without being in direct contact with people with very different views; with people who supported the dictatorship.

I began to see that a little bit in Chile. It was very shocking to me, because my mother’s parents despised Pinochet and my mother’s father had worked in the Allende government, and I was much closer to them. From them I heard constant anti-Pinochet messages and it was very surprising to me. I remember this: I was 11 or 12 when I realized that their version of this story was not universal. I came back from a lunch with an uncle on the other side of my family where I had heard all kinds of pro-dictatorship rhetoric. And I remember asking my anti-Pinochet grandparents about that and it was a moment of revelation where you figure out that the world as you understood it was much more complicated. For example, in the referendum to end the dictatorship the no votes won by 4% or something like that.

But going back to the original question, there wasn’t an embodied sense of nostalgia and longing, but there also wasn’t a covering up of identity. It was just a different moment in time and place, too. Going to Pittsburgh, a place where there wasn’t any kind of a larger exile network or a larger Chilean network, I think you just got on with your life in a certain way. But, at same time, my mother does academic work and writes about Chile. She’s remained in touch with Chilean realities, and she writes about the economic effects of the dictatorship. So that is present, but I wouldn’t say it was being animated or emphasized in any particular way, which might mean something else too. It just might mean that silence might have its own significance.

Madarieta: It also speaks to the complexity of these political situations. Hearing you talk about what it was like in your own family, some even pro-dictatorship and some

vehemently against, it does feel like you couldn't be on one side or the other and actually live and work in Chile. It makes me think about how we're all implicated in these systems of violence here, too. You can talk about how capitalism is destroying our world but we can also see that politics have different layers in different spaces, and they can coexist at the same time.

I didn't know this family history. So, you were born in the States, but you would go back to Chile. Was this during the dictatorship? Was it post-'85, or...

Borzutzky: I was born in '74 and we went more or less every few years until I was 25 or 30. We visited during the dictatorship. My parents left in 1971, which if you tell a Chilean that, those dates are very coded. The immediate understanding of that would be that they left because of Allende, and that's not actually the case. They had come to study in the U.S. and then ended up staying after the dictatorship happened, but my father's father had in fact worked with Allende to found the Socialist Party and then they'd had a falling out prior to Allende taking office. Over, from what I understand, issues of Zionism. My father's father very much identified as a socialist but didn't support Allende. I mean, I don't know how he would have voted, he was certainly very anti-Pinochet, but there are lots of shades within that whole story, which don't get seen very easily.

Madarieta: I wanted to ask you about your translation work, because all of my experience with your work has been through your own poetry and through your translations of other poets. Specifically, in terms of who you translate and decided to translate and the works that you produce, they seem to be interested in historical memory and are very political.

Borzutzky: I'm actually translating a book by a writer named Paula Ilabaca. It's called *La perla suelta* [The Loose Pearl], which is a very different kind of book. It's certainly a political book, but in a very, very different way, and is much more about gender and the way sexual expectations are performed and forming. It's a much more personal book than it is one about the public sphere. I don't know what I will translate after that. I'm interested actually in translating writers from countries where we don't get a lot of work from. I think it would be great to translate writers from Central America. There are so few books of poetry being translated that come from countries in Central America. As a future goal that that would be a direction that I want to go in.

I don't know what that says about my relationship to Chile. I mean the relationship to Chile will continue. *The Performance of Becoming Human* is being published in Chile. I'll be going in June when that book launches. I had just finished a draft of my own book called *Written After a Massacre in the Year 2018*, which takes its title from the Coleridge poem “Written During a Temporary Blindness in the Year 1799”. I really wanted to finish that book at the end of 2018 as a kind of exorcism of the year 2018. Part of that book was very immediately responding to different horrors of 2018, such as the various border crises, the revelations of children being kept in cages in the desert, as well as the shooting of the synagogue in Pittsburgh where I grew up, at the end of 2018.

Up until *The Performance of Becoming Human* there's been much more of a meta and mediated approach to violence that is happening in the books. Since then the writing is getting sparer and less mediated. I can only understand that as feeling the immediacy of those violences and of death. To put it in very simple terms, it's just feeling closer. Like it's something that I don't have to mediate anymore because it's literally gone into the neighborhood and in the synagogue that I grew up going to.

Madarieta: That immediacy feels really present in your recent collection *Lake Michigan*. I have a question of identity, thinking about Latinidades in the United States as you also address it in *Memories of My Overdevelopment*. In *Memories of My Overdevelopment* there's an essay talking about your own experience, in college and universities, of racialization. Essentially being Spanish-speaking and colleagues saying “oh, actually Daniel is Chilean...”

Borzutzky: Yeah, in some ways I think the notion of trying to unify Chile and Chicago is a way of understanding my shared relationship to those two places and a kind of identity. That's certainly a part of it. And part of what I was getting at in that essay was that it was something like...I needed a lot of other people to tell me it was okay to call myself Latino before I could do it myself. Because while I grew up speaking Spanish and while I clearly am Latino, I'm not identified that way, one. But two, I felt like I didn't have access to that identity. I didn't have a kind of permission to write about that part of my life.

I came of age writing and translating at the same time, and translating sort of allowed me to feel as if I could actually write about Chile in a certain way. Translation allowed me a certain kind of contact—which is an outsider's contact, still coming from

the position of outside—but it allowed me to recognize that there are plenty of other people who feel like they both do and do not have national identities or have multiple national identities and don't know how to think about them.