

**¡Cultures in the Air!  
The Multiple Voices of Native Radio in the Americas<sup>1</sup>**

**Luis E. Cárcamo-Huechante**

**Associate Professor, Harvard University**

Through the power of memory the land lives  
also the blood of the ancestors  
Can you see, can you see why,  
he asks  
I still want to dream in this valley?

En la energía de la memoria la tierra vive  
y en ella la sangre de los antepasados  
¿Comprenderás, comprenderás, por qué  
--dice  
aún deseo soñar en este valle?

Ni newen tukulpan mew mogoley ta mapu  
Ka feymu mvley taiñ kuyfikeche tañi mollfvñ  
Kimaymi, kimaymi, chumgelu—feypi  
Petu kvpa pewmalefun tvfachi mapu mew?

**(Elicura Chihuailaf, Mapuche poet)**

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<sup>1</sup> These notes—a preliminary result of my research on indigenous radio—constituted the written base for my presentation in the panel with an eponymous title, **¡Cultures in the Air!: The Multiple Voices of Native Radio in the Americas**, a panel that took place in the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies and was sponsored by The Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard, on Thursday, February 8, 2007. Other participants in this event were, Tiokasin Ghosthorse (Host and Producer of First Voices Indigenous Radio on WBAI Radio, New York); Merilee S. Grindle (Director, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, and Edward S. Mason Professor of International Development, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University); Steve Reifenberg (Executive Director, Santiago Regional Office of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University); and, Doris Sommer (Director, The Cultural Agents Initiative and Ira Jewell Williams, Jr., Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University).

**WIXAGE ANAI!** [*¡Despierta, levántate!* ; Wake up, get up!] is the name of the Mapuche radio program that has been on the airwaves in Santiago, Chile, since 1993, a radio program broadcasted in two languages: Spanish and Mapudungun (the Mapuche language). In the early 1990s, this program was conceived by a group of Mapuche activists living in Santiago, who obtained funding from the new democratic government of Chile to host the program on Radio Nacional de Chile, the State-owned radio station with the widest reach in the country, from Arica to Patagonia, and beyond Chile.

This Mapuche radio team was initially led by Ramón Curivil, a high school teacher and intercultural educator, fluently bilingual, who appears in the last part of the video that we will watch tonight. Other key members of the team are Elías Paillán, who is now the main leader of the group; Elizabeth Huenchual, and José Paillal. All of them are strongly committed to political and cultural activism, as well as fluently bilingual. The radio program Wixage Anai is currently broadcasted from Radio Tierra, a radio station that emerged under the umbrella of the major non-governmental center for women in Santiago, Casa de la Mujer La Morada, founded by feminist activists and independent scholars in the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, the Mapuche radio program was not able to receive funding from the Chilean State, and it had to begin fundraising within the community.

At the moment, this radio program is in precarious financial conditions, as are many native radio experiences in Latin America. Wixage Anai is financed with small monthly contributions from members of the Mapuche community in Santiago, in order to be able to broadcast their program, which airs from 7 to 8 pm Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. The program is also aired through the Radio Tierra website. According to Elías Paillán, one of the major reasons for the lack of support from the government is the fact that it is a program that is both cultural and political. Indeed, the Wixage Anai team vindicates “autonomy”—a crucial notion in the development of indigenous movements in Latin America—from the government.

This sense of “autonomy” enables them to hold strong community ties, and to work in solidarity with the political and social movement of the Mapuche people, which has confirmed its struggle for land rights and political citizenship. On the other hand, Wixage Anai is about struggling for politico-cultural citizenship, through the active use of Mapudungun in each broadcast.

In this context, I would like to highlight three aspects at stake in the experience of the radio program Wixage Anai:

1. **Community building.** Wixage Anai is a program that is strongly connected to a process of community survival. First of all, the program is constantly linking its airwaves to the activities of the Mapuche community in the Greater Santiago area; furthermore, the program is part of a broader initiative that works under the name Jvfken Mapu Center, which is a team of activists who organize periodic cultural activities in the Quinta Normal, a major park close to downtown Santiago. One of the recurrent issues that indigenous communities experience today is that of dispersion. Radio programs are tools to bring this dispersed community together, either physically—through the Center’s weekend activities or through the airwaves of the program, which, after all, has become a powerful medium. Indeed, the program is aired not only in Santiago but also in local radio stations in Southern Chile, a region traditionally associated with the Mapuche people and where communal ways of life still survive in rural areas.
2. **Memory-making.** The Mapuche radio programming seeks to bring the younger generations in contact with the voices and experiences of the elderly in the community. They periodically invite the elderly to speak on these programs about their histories of displacement from southern Chile to the capital city of the country. In some occasions, as we will watch in the video, these elderly members of the community are interviewed at home, with young and old members of the family together. Moreover, some radio programs are directly aired from the home where the in situ interview takes place.
3. **The role of narratives.** Another key aspect in this indigenous media experience is the role of narratives. In the recovery of Mapuche family stories, the Wixage

Anai program opens a space for the delivery of personal and collective stories through conversation, in both Spanish and Mapudungun. Narratives are key components of each radio program, which puts the modern medium of radio into traditional oral culture. As Walter Ong has keenly indicated, “narrative is in certain ways more widely functional in primary oral cultures than in others” (137).

## 2

This group of Mapuche radio commentators is part of the expanding phenomenon of Mapuches who have migrated to cities, and particularly to Santiago, those who have come to be called MapUrbes. Traditionally, the Mapuche population has been located in southern Chile and southern Argentina. As a community, they are strongly linked to a sense of territorial identity, to the land, and through it, the earth. Mapuche, in fact, means people of earth.

According to the Chilean National Census of the year 2002, there are 692,192 indigenous people in Chile, which constitutes 4.6% of the population of a country whose overall population is 15,116,435 people. Of these, 604,349 people are Mapuche. Drawing data from the National Census from the years 1992 and 2002, the scholar Rúbén Sánchez shows that there are 159,638 Mapuche people in the Region de la Araucania, the main region where they live in rural and urban southern Chile. Strikingly enough, this same data shows that there are also 124,459 Mapuches living in Santiago, a city of over 5 million people.

In this context, the Mapuche radio program is a strategic medium for linguistic, cultural and political survival of indigenous peoples in a highly transnational and global Chile, a country that has a public face of economic and political “stability” and “success” but which has pending issues in the social and economic arena (poverty, education, environment). Among these pending issues, cultural problems such as racism and homophobia are still hidden, although at times they can suddenly rise to the surface and

become visible tensions in society. The radio program Wixage Anai performs the possibility of linguistic and cultural awareness in contemporary Chile.

### 3

In this sense, indigenous radio broadcasters and producers are developing the type of “emancipatory use of media” theorized by Hans Magnus Enzensberger more than three decades ago. For Enzensberger, this use of media implies aspects such as “interaction of those involved, feedback”; “a political learning process”, and “collective production”. Indeed, Wixage Anai is a program that is based around the presence of a community and on a communicational process, which bring together language, culture and politics to work against the hegemonic monocultural process that is dominant in mainstream society.

There many experiences in the Americas that present creative and collective uses of radio as a tool that brings dispersed communities together. It is the case, for example, of Radio Chanul Pom, in the highlands of Chiapas in Southern Mexico. Radio Chanul Pom began broadcasting on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003, as an extension of Las abejas organization, a grassroots initiative that has worked in the areas of social and cultural activism in the region since 1992. This indigenous and bilingual radio uses mostly Spanish, Tseltal and Tsotsil languages, and it is a bridge that connects about 40 communities in the region.

In the cities of General Roca and Bariloche, in Southern Argentina, a team of Mapuche women have developed the experience of the *micros*, which are 3-5 minute radio programs that use the aesthetic of the video clip in the context of radio programming, broadcasting fragments of music, storytelling, and brief political and cultural messages. This radio micro-program is a creative way to overcome the precarious financial conditions under which this Equipo de Comunicación Mapuche has been working; the “micros” can go on the airwaves for 3-4 minutes, which implies a low budget that can be affordable for the Mapuche team and its community-based fundraising.

These experiences pose an obvious question: why is the radio so widely used by indigenous communities in the Americas? Drawing lessons from the aforementioned experiences, it seems that radio constitutes an approachable medium for indigenous communities that, either in cities or rural areas, can be used to build their communicational spaces under precarious conditions. Radio is not a highly expensive medium, but can be affordable for communities that are marginalized from the flow of wealth across nations and regions in the current process of globalization. However, this “approachability” of radio as a medium is also related to a deeper connection: oral communication. Through radio, indigenous individuals and communities can perform their oral traditions in their multiple ways; an intimate connection that enables them not only to be listeners but also speakers, and to put their demands, their dreams, and their cultures back in the air.