Indigenous Belonging in the City
Recreating Mapuche Spaces in Santiago de Chile

This paper presents a case where history seems to move in fits and starts and circles. Mapuche belonging was erased from Santiago de Chile more than 4 centuries ago by Spanish conquistadors. Now the Mapuche are recreating a sense of belonging in peripheral neighbourhoods of the same city. In the late 1800s the newly independent Chilean republic attempted to complete the Spanish colonial project by forcefully annexing the lands to the south of the Biobío River. This violent taking of Mapuche lands was justified with the terra nullius principle, the legal fiction that Mapuche lands were somehow ‘empty’. In recent years the linearity of this version of history has been given a new shape with the displacement of Mapuche off rural lands in the south. Some of those now living in Santiago have begun to build rukas (ancestral Mapuche huts) as cultural and religious centres on ‘vacant’ state-owned land in the city. Whereas the colonisation of Mapuche lands in the south was based on a story that never really fit, the building of these rukas in Santiago superficially echoes that story but with important differences. According to the story, the Chilean state would have taken ‘empty’ lands in the south to make them productive. The Mapuche in Santiago, on the other hand, do occupy ‘empty’ state-owned lands and do make them productive. They request access to informal rubbish tips and fill them with meaningful cultural and religious activities. In this way they create new spaces of Mapuche belonging on small patches of the lands that were taken from their ancestors centuries ago.

Keywords — Mapuche; Indigenous belonging; urban history; Santiago, Chile.

INTRODUCTION

Walter Benjamin insisted that our modern views of history are inherently problematic (Benjamin 1940). Our “stubborn faith in progress” is unfounded and time simply does not conform to our production-line ideas of “homogenous and empty time.” This paper argues similarly that time does not follow the linear progression promoted by positivistic social sciences. Time often seems to move in fits and starts and even in circles. Maybe it is actually moving in a spiral.1 Mythical time is not simply a relic of ‘primitive’ societies nor was it eliminated by the advent of Western Modernity. It often comes back to haunt us in the most unexpected places (Guillen 2001). Though Indigenous people have lived in cities since early colonial times (Blatman-Thomas 2017), scholars have only recently begun to question the mainstream assumption that

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1 Gavilán (2009, 95) explains how Mapuche thought is based on a “circling”, or spiral, movement. This means among other things that their idea of time is ciclical.
“real” Indigenous people live on reservations or in rural areas and those that move to or live in cities are somehow no longer Indigenous (Fredericks 2013, Keenan 2013, Jampolsky 2016, Blomley 2004).

This paper presents the case of the Mapuche (literally, people of the land: mapa – land, che – people) and their associations in Santiago that are occupying comodatos (free leaseholds) on vacant state-owned lands. Their actions are superficially reminiscent of the stories used to justify the colonisation of their lands in the south. But this time the stories are not myths (like terra nullius) but realistic descriptions of their peaceful actions. Their actions reverse the positivist’s iron clad laws of societal development which dictate an irreversible linear movement from primitive stages of collectivism to higher stages of private property and enterprise (Míguez 2015).

**METHODS**

The information, ideas and life stories that contributed to the making of this paper were gathered in a 3 month long ethnographic engagement with the communities of rukas in Santiago. They form part of the fieldwork for my PhD research which is in turn a component of a larger research project on property politics, sustainability and urban redevelopment in three cities (Melbourne, São Paulo and Santiago). I performed 8 semi-structured interviews at one ruka, Follicle Afliaiai, and 9 other, more structured, interviews at 9 other rukas. For the writing of this paper I sent an early version of the abstract to Mapuche ruka coordinators – lonko Samuel Melinao (ruka Kallfulikan), Amelia Gaete Pinda (centro ceremonial Weichafe Mapu) and Yazmin Quiilaquro (ruka Ñi Mongen) – and two Chilean PhD students – Magdalena Ugarte and Mauro Fontana – who also research on different aspects of Mapuche life in urban areas. Their email responses were essential in refining the argument presented in this paper.

Not included here, but important for the broader project, I also interviewed government officials including urban planners, legal advisors and Indigenous affairs officers from three local municipalities (Cerro Navia, La Pintana and Peñalolén), officials at CONADI (the National Indigenous Development Corporation) and at SERVIU (the branch of the Ministry of Housing that builds social housing). The broader project also included the production of maps with official spatial data (property, construction and population figures) and other maps with spatial data from the interviews held at the rukas.

**PURGING THE INDIGENOUS FROM THE CITY**

At the time of the arrival of the Spanish explorers Santiago was Mapuche land. Mainstream historiography presents Santiago as an exchange post between the Inca empire to the north and the Mapuche nations to the south. Mapuche commentators, however, understand their ancestral territories to have extended much further north and east.

In legal terms, inscribed in laws, on paper, the Mapuche people were recognised as a Spanish colony; in documents, recognised to the south of the Biobío River, but historically, the territory of the Mapuche people went from Copiapó to the south and included part of Argentina, which was all one single people. (Samuel Melinao, interview, translation mine)

![Mapuche territory from 1598 to 1883 included all lands south of those conquered by Spaniards (large hatched area) except island of Chilhue (small hatched area) and city of Valdivia (circled). Source: Gobierno de Chile 2003, 331.](image1)

![Key interviews](image2)

The Mapuche in the vicinity of Santiago were for the most part killed or displaced by the Spanish conquistadors (Gobierno de Chile 2003). Of the few traces that remain of their presence are place names, such as the local municipal area of Peñalolén. But also as ruka coordinator Amelia Gaete Pinda said, “under … Santiago there are traces of Indigenous people, cemeteries and villages” (personal email communication, 25 September 2017).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key interviews</th>
<th>Other roles</th>
<th>Code - Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beatriz Pantigrupo</td>
<td>Multicultural advisor, Metro Health Service East</td>
<td>A - Ruka Follicle Afliaiai</td>
<td>Peñalolén</td>
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<tr>
<td>Juana Masquapti</td>
<td>Coordinator of FESPH programme at Ruka ML</td>
<td>B - Ruka Mapu Llanos</td>
<td>La Pintana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amelia Gaete Pinda</td>
<td>Co-director Ceremonial Coordination</td>
<td>C - Parque Ceremonial Weichafe Mapu</td>
<td>Cerro Navia</td>
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<td>Samuel Melinao</td>
<td>Ruka Fr</td>
<td>D - Ruka Kallfulikan</td>
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<td>Yazmin Quiilaquro</td>
<td>Head of Indigenous Peoples Metro Health Service SE</td>
<td>E - Ruka Ñi Mongen</td>
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<td>Juana Chuayguy</td>
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Spaniards ‘success’ in conquering the lands around Santiago was not matched in the more densely populated Mapuche

6 Copiapó is roughly 800km to the north of Santiago (see figure 1).
areas of the south, however. These were fiercely defended and this led to a truce being drawn and the river Biobío being used as a frontier between the Spanish colony to the north and Mapuche lands to the south.

Structured diplomatic relations called ‘parlamientos’ managed frontier relations throughout the rest of the colonial period and into the first decades of republican Chilean history (Contreras Palinomal 2007). Though this preserved Mapuche lands to the south of the Biobío River (see figure 1) as an independent and sovereign nation, another effect was to erase Mapuche belonging to the north of the border in Santiago and the Valle Central valley). The few Indigenous people left living north of the border were enslaved as part of the encomienda process (Ginni 2006), miscegenated or simply no longer considered Indigenous.

**TAKING THE LANDS SOUTH OF THE RIVER: TAKE 1**

Chilean independence from the Spanish crown did not immediately change frontier relations. But soon the allure of the ‘empty’ lands to the south started to grow. Míguez (2015) explains how the newly independent Latin American republics of the XIXth century looked to European ideas of modernity and productivity based on private property in an attempt to overcome what they saw as the backwardness of their colonial past. Legislators in Santiago decided the southern lands were ‘empty’ and could be more productively used by European yeomen working the land on their individual properties (Bengoa 2014). The 1866 Ley sobre Tierras de la Frontera (frontiers lands law) regulated the process of settlement that was to come. The law recognised only those lands on which the Mapuche could prove “at least one year of effective and uninterrupted use” (Gobierno de Chile 1866). According to the dominant story following ideas of property theorists such as John Locke, these lands were unproductive because they were common lands. The story insisted they could be made productive through the institution of private property which would help distinguish who owned what, reduce conflicts over ownership and allow for increased investment and productivity (Rose 1994). In line with this story all lands where Mapuche could not prove European-style “uninterrupted use” were considered empty - terra nullius – and were declared state property. Then starting at that time and continuing until 1883 the Chilean army violently implemented the legislators’ vision (Gobierno de Chile 2003). The intent in the words of colonel Cornelio Saavedra was precisely to make space for foreign colonisers:  

by giving [foreign] colonisation the importance it deserves and by promoting it accordingly... not long after the existence of savage tribes within the Republic will be history... (Saavedra 1870 cited in Ugarte, Fontana & Cautín 2017)

The state then distributed property titles to those lands to prospective European settlers (Bengoa 2014). Their plan was to fill the empty lands and make them productive with the arrival of white settlers. According to the story in their heads the supposed superiority of the European yeomen would inevitably increase productivity. But the actual results on the ground were quite different. The Europeans who were attracted to these free frontier lands being given away in European rural properties). To make way for this process the Mapuche were forced onto reducciones (reserves) 9. These lands – those on which they were able to prove yearlong uninterrupted use – usually included only the actually space of their religious ceremonies) in the city of Santiago (Figueroa Huencho 2007). And “they insisted that because the Mapuche in the city did not develop their spiritual side, they in some way were no longer Mapuche” (Informe Comisión Verdad Histórica y Nuevo Trato as cited in Figueroa Huencho 2007, 191, translation mine).

The Mapuche who arrived in Santiago found life in the city conspired to erase their Mapuche identity (Alvarado 2016). Racism is strong in the city and most preferred not to speak Mapuzugun in public places to avoid further stigmatisation (Alvarado 2016). The sons and daughters of Mapuche arrivals were not even taught the language that had created such shame for their parents. Slowly the number of those from the first, second and third generation who spoke Mapuzugun dwindled. Recent statistics highlight that only 15.5% of the Indigenous population in urban areas in Chile speak or understand their native language whereas 25.8% in rural areas do (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social 2015). This racism went hand in hand with their own doubt about whether they could be Mapuche at all. According to the story the Mapuche never (strength/energy) does not leave its ancestral lands in the south and thus they could not perform aguilillan (religious ceremonies) in the city of Santiago (Figueroa Huencho 2007). And “they insisted that because the Mapuche in the city did not develop their spiritual side, they in some way were no longer Mapuche” (Informe Comisión Verdad Histórica y Nuevo Trato as cited in Figueroa Huencho 2007, 191, translation mine).

After decades of being thus invisibilised, during the later years of Pinochet’s dictatorship, some groups started to organise in the city to recover their cultural roots. Ruka coordinator Beatriz Painiqueo explained that the original members of Follikhe Afsaai tented a large warehouse in Núñoa, a peri-central municipal area. As there were very few Mapuche organisations in the city at the time, people from all over the Metropolitan region came to participate there. “[T]here we had a space for more than 15 years ... we attracted people from ... La Pintana, La Florida, La Granja, Maipú, I don’t know, Cerro Navia, Pudahuel” (Beatriz Painiqueo, interview, translation mine).

There was a growing sense that these people could once more consider themselves Mapuche in the city. However this resurgence of Mapuche identity was not without its detractors. Even today most of mainstream society only knows the
Mapuche as a rural people who live(d) on the reducciones in rural areas of the south of the country – far from Santiago. Even those Mapuche who live in the southern part do not believe those living in Santiago can be counted as ‘real’ Mapuche. “[O]ur brothers from the 9th Region [in the south], at least around there, had the opinion that the Mapuche from the city [of Santiago] … were no longer Mapuche” (Beatrix Painiqueo, interview, translation mine). It was as if these people stopped being Mapuche once they left the rural space of the reducciones just as the Census stopped counting them as Mapuche for the same reason. In the few censuses prior to 1992 that counted Indigenous population the method used was to count the number of people present on the reducciones on the census day. This would change in 1992 and the whole country was surprised by the numbers that pointed to a large proportion (somewhere between 44.1% in 1992 and 30.3% in 2002) of the Mapuche population now residing in Santiago!

In 1995 a ruka – traditional round, wooden-framed Mapuche house with pitched straw roof – was built on part of the property of the Catholic school Verbo Divino in the municipality of La Florida. Organisers wanted to perform the first nguillatun in the city on this property (Figueroa Huencho 2007). But the organisers felt unsure of themselves. Was it really possible to perform a traditional Mapuche ‘rural’ ceremony in the city? The city didn’t seem pure enough for the holding of ceremonies since it lacked the silence and nature that are so prevalent in rural areas. It was also not ideal for ceremonies because it is filled with the presence of the wingka – the Chilean colonisers.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 3: Ruka Kalfilíkan in La Florida with sign advertising traditional health appointments. Source: author.**

For this ceremony to be held in Santiago they felt the need for the validation and authorisation of the elders who pointed out that what was important ‘was to believe, was faith in the validity of the ceremony’ (Figueroa Huencho 2007, 273, translation mine)

Though the nguillatun ceremonies were to become more common in Santiago in the decades to come, this specific ruka itself did not last long. Soon the Catholic school decided to sell the land the ruka was built on and thus the group was displaced. This led to the dispersal of all those who had participated at this ruka. People started to search for available spaces near their own homes in different peripheral neighbourhoods of Santiago. Beatriz Painiqueo (interview, translation mine) explained this as reminiscent of traditional Mapuche spatiality from the south:

> it is better for one group to be there, another one here; it is a style like that of old, because our organisation socially, more ancestrally, so to speak, were organisations through lof-che,12 that is, there was never a single centre, there was never only one ‘city’, but groups that were distant from each other, with differentiation of kinship with each other, ok? ... this being dispersed in different municipalities [of Santiago], it is coincidentally almost all of our ancestral customs due to spatial problems and also to being inserted in the more peripheral municipalities also, of the city of Santiago.

Finding Empty Space In The City

How did these Mapuche groups find land on which to build their rukas? Interestingly here their actions seem to superficially echo the story that was used to justify the taking of their ancestral lands in the south. They find vacant or ‘empty’ lands to then use these to build their rukas on. Most interviews with ruka coordinators explicitly mentioned how the groups found rubbish tips, as these were an indication that the land was vacant, or that they petitioned different state institutions until they were offered available land near their homes – and the land they were given turned out to be rubbish tips too. For example, Juana Cheuquepan (coordinator of ruka Kille Pu Liwen) explained how they found a local rubbish tip and spent 2 years looking for the owner of the property (Carmona 2015). They would go to SERVIU (the national social housing corporation) who would send them to the municipality. The municipality would then send them back to SERVIU. After a number of these trips they discovered the land had belonged to a detenido desaparecido12 (literally, detained disappeared). Be that as it may, the very fact they used rubbish tips as indicators to find vacant properties highlights how in Western cultures we tend to see empty lands as wasteful and available to be filled with waste. As Samuel Melinao (interview, translation mine) pointed out “in Chile, unfortunately, the spaces that are not occupied, are transformed into ... rubbish tips”. Yet in the Mapuche worldview there are no ‘vacant’ lands. Lands are not empty but meaningfully filled at different times. A field may be ‘empty’ at one moment but filled with a nguillatun ceremony or a palin13 game at another.

> If we look at it from the point of view, from the philosophical point of view of, from the Indigenous way, from the Mapuche way, we, uh, no human being owns the land, no ... Therefore, the earth is an entity that uh, we inhabit it to use it and not to abuse it. So today in reality what we are doing is abusing the spaces that, by nature, are given to us (Samuel Melinao, interview, translation mine).

Are these lands Mapuche associations find vacant because there are no owners using the lands? Or are they seen as vacant because there are no intended social or economic uses for them (Sack 1983)? Either way the result is that their finding of vacant lands parallels, in an odd reversal, the colonial story used to justify the taking of their ancestral lands in the south as terra nullius. They find lands that are considered vacant according to mainstream society, clean them out and build rukas on them to use as cultural and religious centres.

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10 The 1992 census counted a total of 928,060 Mapuche in the country. The 2002 census reduced that number to 604,349 by rewording the census question. In 2012, another different census question made the number grow again, this time to 1,508,722. The proportion of the Mapuche recorded as living in Santiago in 2012 was 37.4% (Aravena 2014).

11 Literally lof–che means communities of people, lof – community, che – people. The term is used to refer to the traditional village structure of the Mapuche.

12 This euphemistic term indicates those the Centro Nacional de Informaciones or CNI (National Centre of Information) disposed of during the dictatorship.

13 Palín is a traditional Mapuche game that is similar to grass hockey.
The result of this novel form of land appropriation is that these Mapuche groups fill these spaces with activities. These activities at different rukas include some combination of the following: traditional workshops (weaving, Mapucaypun language, silversmithing, medicinal herbs), ethnic tourism, traditional sports (palin), ancestral health consultations and religious ceremonies (We Tripantu, the Mapuche “New Year”, and nguillatun, rogations). These activities create a Mapuche presence in the peripheral neighbourhoods of the city by offering different traditional activities to residents of the neighbourhoods they are located in. They also add a greater perception of security (Durand-Lasserve 2006) of tenure and belonging and visibility.

The argument presented in this paper benefitted greatly from comments provided by Mapuche ruka coordinators.lonko

DISCUSSION

In relation to history paper presents a modest contribution to recent discussions on colonialism as not only a historic – ‘past’ and ‘finished’ – process but also a current reality (Wolfe 2006). Often these discussions proceed in logical fashion to delineate the present and continued dispossessions of Indigenous lands and livelihoods through modern means that are at times subtle (Ugarte et al. 2017) or at times violent (Toledo Llancaqueo 2007). This linear view of history does not quite unsettle our strong belief in the inevitability of western notions of progress. I do not here want to criticise this literature. These contributions are invaluable as they help us see that processes we thought were long finished are, in fact, continuing to happen before our very eyes. Yet something else is also happening in our midst. In the case of Santiago the Mapuche have been creating an urban belonging using vacant urban lands.

Secondly what do the two stories of finding and using empty space tell us about the Western idea of an empty space? In the Western imaginary both spaces – Mapuche ancestral lands in the south and state-owned lands within the city of Santiago – were/are deemed vacant. This is because of which fact to place where, or of facts without places and places without facts (Sack 1985, 58)

The first was made vacant through a legal fiction (Blomley 2014) and the second through different bureaucratic processes of whichever state institution owns the land. Eduardo Zenteno, head of property management at SERVIU, explained these lands were zoned for community services which never materialised in their social housing projects. In the south of Chile the terra nullius principle was violently imposed by the Chilean state and military – ironically named Pacificación de la Araucanía. The attempt to forcefully make Mapuche lands productive by importing (urban) European yeomen did not work.

The Mapuche imaginary sees both spaces differently. The Mapuche ancestral lands were certainly not thought of as empty at all, whereas in Santiago the state’s view these lands were vacant was accepted for pragmatic reasons. In this second case the only conflict one could speak of is not the violent imposition of foreign military power but the conflicting intentions the Mapuche associations and Chilean state bureaucracy have for these lands. The state sees the rukas as temporary as they are built on comodato contracts that guarantee the ownership of the lending state institution. The Mapuche groups themselves see these lands as micro Mapuche territories they have gained and that they do not intend to give back that easily. Finally the constant presence and hard work of these groups on these sites fill these comodatos with meaningful activity. In this sense these spaces are making these lands more productive and creating spaces of Mapuche belonging in the city of Santiago.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to show how history can at times be unruly. The colonial story that justified the taking of Mapuche lands in the south, because they were supposedly ‘empty’, is oddly echoed in reverse as Mapuche associations occupy vacant state owned lands in Santiago. Whereas in the first case this story was imposed by brute force, in the second it is peacefully enacted through formal requests. But the most interesting difference is not in these stories but in their results. The Chilean imposition resulted, all private property ideology notwithstanding, in making ‘empty’ lands less productive, whereas the Mapuche occupation of vacant lands in Santiago results in their being filled with meaningful activities once again.

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Samuel Melino, Amelia Gaete Pinda and Yazmin Quilaqueo and two Chilean PhD students Magdalena Ugarte and Mauro Fontana. Needless to say, any remaining errors are my sole responsibility.

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