

Indigenous Belonging in the City

Recreating *Mapuche* Spaces in Santiago de Chile

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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

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 cyclical.

“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 Mapuche² (literally, people of the land: mapu – 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, Folilche Aflai, 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 – lonko³ Samuel Melinao (*ruka Kallfulikan*), Amelia Gaete Pinda (*centro ceremonial⁴ Weichafe Mapu*) and Yazmin Quilaqueo (*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 empire⁵ 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

2 In this text I italicise words in languages other than English when they refer to meaningful concepts for the people I interviewed. In this way I attempt to reflect in a small way the complexities of life for the *Mapuche* in Santiago as some of these words are in Spanish (the language of the *wingka*, the coloniser) and some are in *Mapuzugun* (the *Mapuche* language).

3 *Lonko* refers to the traditional leader of a *lof* (*Mapuche* community).

4 Some of the rukas are located on larger plots of land and are referred to as centros ceremoniales (ceremonial centres).

5 In fact as Samuel Melinao clarified, “the first *Mapuche* conflict was with the Incas ... which did not become a major problem since the Incas were not interested in the land ... but rather only the gold” (personal email communication, 23 September 2017).

people went from Copiapó⁶ to the south and included part of Argentina, which was all one single people. (Samuel Melinao, interview, translation mine)

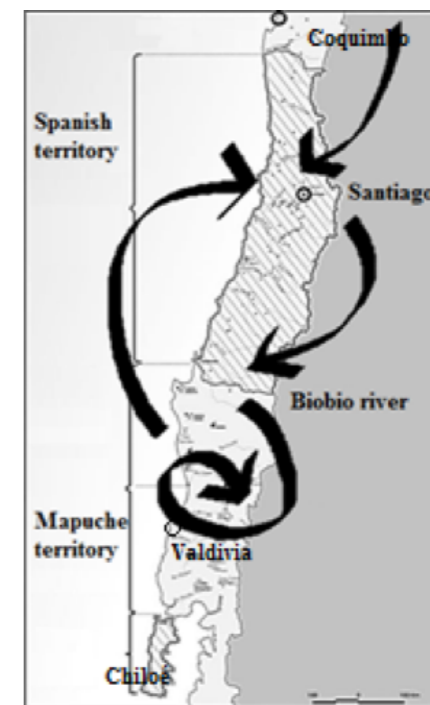


Figure 1: Mapuche territory from 1598 to 1883 included all lands south of those conquered by Spaniards (large hatched area) except island of Chilhue (small hatched area) and city of Valdivia (circled). Source: Gobierno de Chile 2003, 331.

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).

Key interviews	Other roles	Code - Name	Location
Beatriz Painiqueo	Multicultural advisor, Metro Health Service East	A - Ruka Folilche Aflai	Peñalolén
Juana Huenufil	Coordinator of PESPI programme at Ruka ML	B - Ruka Mapu Lawen	La Pintana
Amelia Gaete Pinda		C - Parque Ceremonial Weichafe Mapu	Cerro Navia
Samuel Melinao	Ruka fe	D - Ruka Kallfulikan	La Florida
Yazmin Quilaqueo	Head of Indigenous Peoples Metro. Health Service SE	F - Ruka Ni Mongen	Puente Alto
Juana Cheuquepan		G - Ruka Kiñe Pu Liwen	La Pintana

Figure 2: key to interviews used in this paper

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 ‘parlamentos’ managed frontier relations throughout the rest of the colonial period and into the first decades of republican Chilean history (Contreras *Painemal* 2007).⁷ 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* (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* (frontier 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 & Caulkins 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.⁸ According to the story in their heads the supposed superiority of the European yeoman 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 offices were mostly urban poor who had no experience with agriculture and thus were not able to tame the land (Bengoa 2014). Most of the lands were quickly sold and concentrated in the hands of a few largely unproductive *latifundios* (large 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 rukas and adjacent vegetable gardens or what resembled European property. The *Mapuche* were greatly impoverished by this displacement to the *reducciones* and had to sell all their cattle because they no longer had lands to graze it on. This led

⁷ Contrary to common Anglo-academic practice I will at times include both paternal and maternal surnames (common practice in Chile) in order to better highlight the *Mapuche* belonging of certain authors as in, for example, (Contreras) *Painemal* and (Alvarado) *Lincopi*.

⁸ The word in Spanish however is not ‘settlers’ but *colonos*. This comes from the same root as the word ‘to colonise’.

⁹ The *reducciones* corresponded to approximately 5% of the land the *Mapuche* had prior to the Pacificación.

to the beginning of a second process of (rural-urban) displacement. However there is no statistical data from this period to help us understand the dimensions of this phenomenon (Bengoa 2014). This did have one positive result however. The *reducciones* lands were defined as a separate class of property, not private and not state but Indigenous property, and they were not included in the property market. However the legislators’ intent was that this Indigenous property would be no more than a temporary legal exception (Sugranyes, Morales & Aravena 2014). They hoped it would be quickly phased out to make way for the superior civilising power of private property.

TAKING THE LANDS SOUTH OF THE RIVER: TAKE 2

The following decades were witness to a series of attempts by Chilean legislators to eliminate that legal exception of Indigenous property – and with it the *reducciones*. The idea was to assimilate the *Mapuche* making them disappear, becoming indistinguishable from other poor rural farmhands. Numerous laws – in 1927, 1930, 1931 and 1961 – varied only the percentage of *Mapuche* community members required to trigger the process of changing the status of collective Indigenous property to individual private properties (Míguez 2013). But it was the dictator Augusto Pinochet who found a way to finish this incomplete colonisation of the south of Chile. During the dictatorship, and without any democratic obstructions, the solution was much simpler. He unilaterally passed a law stating only one person would be required to trigger the division of the *reducciones* and that person did not even have to be *Mapuche* (Míguez 2013). Finally the legal exception of Indigenous properties would be eliminated and the region made more productive. The actual process of dividing up the *reducciones* was chaotic at best. Surveyors assigned lands to those present on the spot, often creating more conflicts than they were meant to solve. Family members who were away working in the city at the time were not assigned any lands at all (Bengoa 2014). This significantly increased the existing rural-urban displacement as further impoverished *Mapuche* moved to cities to look for any form of employment. *Mapuche* authors refer to this process as “la diáspora mapuche, el exilio forzado, el éxodo” – the *Mapuche* diaspora, forced exile, the exodus (Antileo Baeza 2007, 21).

RECREATING MAPUCHE BELONGING IN THE CITY

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* in the city. According to one idea the *Mapuche newen* (strength/energy) does not leave its ancestral lands in the south and thus they could not perform *nguillatun* (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 *Folilche Aflai* rented a large warehouse in Ñuñoa, 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 south often 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*” (Beatriz 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% 2002)¹⁰ 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.



Figure 3: Ruka Kallfulikan 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*

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).

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,¹¹ 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 also part 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* Kiñe 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 desaparecido*¹² (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 (lonko at *ruka* Kallfulikan, 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 *palin*¹³ 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.

¹¹ Literally *lofche* 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 *Palin* is a traditional *Mapuche* game that is similar to grass hockey.

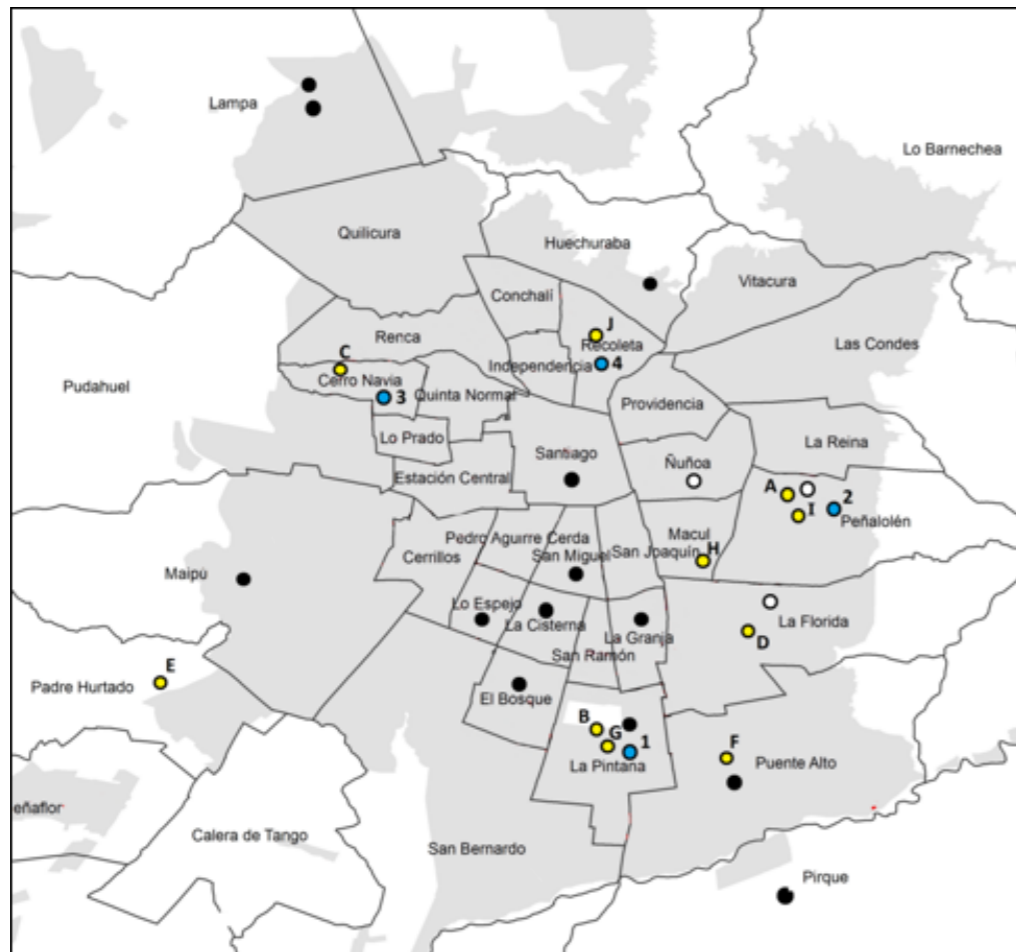


Figure 4: Rukas in Santiago (yellow interviewed, white abandoned, black others), municipal offices interviewed in blue.

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, *Mapuzugun* language, silversmithing, medicinal herbs), ethnic tourism, traditional sports (palin), ancestral health consultations and religious ceremonies (We Tripanu, 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 by keeping these lands that are merely held in comodato filled with meaningful activities throughout the week. Though the *comodato* contracts explicitly affirm the ownership of the lending state institution (the first article of all contracts states the ownership of the property), this filling of the properties with meaningful *Mapuche* activities charges them with a differentiated significance. They become micro-territories, spaces of *Mapuche* belonging and visibility.

I don't think they will get us out that easily, because besides we now have an international law that protects us and they would have to think two or three times before taking us out. Now, one of the reasons they could get us out, is if this space did not have life, but this is a place, where we work every day. (Juana Huenafil, ruka Mapu Lawen, interview, translation mine)

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 disposessions 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

space [is conceptually separated] from things and then recombine[d] ... as an assignment of things to places and places to things. This assignment or recombination makes it appear as though there is a problem of which fact to place where, or of facts without places and places without facts (Sack 1983, 59)

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. The *Mapuche* groups peacefully occupy these spaces by requesting comodatos from the state institutions that own them. 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the Australian Research Council [DP140102851].

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

Samuel *Melinao*, 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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