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The Image Keeps Talking: A Visual Interrogation of the Colonial Archive of the Mapuche People

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ABSTRACT

This essay interrogates the colonial visual archive of the Mapuche people as a decolonial exercise. As a decolonial intervention, it moves away from phenomenological approaches to visual archives in which meaning resides only in the image. Rather it proposes to engage with colonial history and its social formations as ongoing forms of political power that give shape to the Chilean nation-state, modernity, and capitalist extraction. A decolonial engagement with visual culture is not a restoration of the “original meaning” of colonial archives, but a critical interrogation of the remainders of structural forms of subjugation and differentiation from the present. Thus, I propose to place Gustavo Milet Ramírez’s photographic portraits of Mapuche women along with the racialization of the Mapuche people and dispossession and extraction of their territories at the turn of the twentieth century. I read these images from the present with Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez’s short film *Chi Rüttram Amulnei ñi Rüttram* in order to unlock the rigidity of colonial meaning and explore questions of subaltern history-making, gender, Indigeneity, culture, and extractivism. For this final point, I will discuss the complex contestations that Indigenous media offers to critically engage with colonial visual regimes and forms of cultural agency.

KEYWORDS: Visual culture; colonialism; archives; Mapuche

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Figure 1. “Indios Araucanos de Traiguén, Sud America, Chile”. Gustavo Milet Ramirez (c. 1890)

In a portrait taken by French-Chilean photographer Gustavo Milet Ramírez, a Mapuche woman wears a cloth headband, two kinds of silver earrings on each earlobe, and three different types of silver pendants along with a chain of round silver plates on her chest. She also wears a black *kepam* (garment), a black *ikiila* (poncho) over her shoulders, and a *trariime* (belt) around her waist. She looks at the camera (Fig. 1). Framed as *Indios Araucanos de Traiguén, Sud America-Chile*, this cabinet card is part of a series reproducible photographic cards taken by Milet Ramírez in his photography studio in the city of Traiguén in southern Chile. A number “17” has been written close to the right arm of the Mapuche model indexing its place

in the portrait series of the Araucanian¹ Indians of South America. “Portrait 18” (Fig. 2) presents another anonymous Mapuche woman wearing a cloth band, the same *trarilongko* (round silver plates) on her head, one of the same silver earrings, and the *trapelakucha* (silver pendants) on her chest. The woman also looks at the camera. This time the jewelry reflects the light of the photography studio; the same frame that indexes this image is part of Milet Ramírez’s photographic portrait series. Two Mapuche women are seated next to each other (Fig. 3). Both women’s arms are in the same pose emphasizing the planar photographic surface and backdrop’s flatness. Both women wear headbands and black *kepam* and *ikiila* as well as silver earrings. While the woman on the viewer’s left wears the same *trapelakucha* from the previous two photographs and a *sekil* (silver chain), the woman on the right wears the previously seen and modeled *trarilongko* and another silver pendant on her chest. Once again, both women face the camera. This is image “23” in the series.

The recent and numerous publications of declassified early Mapuche photographs produced at the turn of the twentieth century in Chile in the form of serialized photographic cards—such as of *cartes-de-visite* and cabinet cards—commonly approach these portraits as

¹ Araucanian, or Araucanos in Spanish, is a dated term for the Mapuche people.



Figure 2 and 3. “Indios Araucanos de Traiguén, Sud América, Chile”. Gustavo Milet Ramirez (c. 1890)

visual commodities of a fabricated other, or as the visual celebration of liberalism’s radical integration into modernity².

In their seminal compilation of cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards, *Mapuche Fotografías Siglos XIX y XX. Construcción y Montaje de un Imaginario*, art historian Margarita Alvarado considers these images as referents of the national imaginary of the Mapuche people contaminated by foreign hands; thus, these photographic cards are deceitful images of the nation (20). In

Mapuche y Anglicanos, anthropologists Jorge Pavez and André Menard explain that the declassified photographic album of an Anglican mission in Mapuche territories makes visible the

Mapuche people’s integration into the Chilean nation-state and extractive capitalism due to the “presentation of a world of Mapuche subjects with proper names, placed in a fully alive and active space” (15). Although Alvarado and Pavez and

Menard seem to contradict each other here, both approaches to these photographs rely on an indexical understanding of the image wherein the photograph is a transparent reflection that bears one meaning. In the first case, a photographic

referent can be either “true” or “false;” on the second, a visual construction represents a subject’s exclusion or inclusion in

a social organization. However, are there ways of seeing this

colonial visual archive produced in Chile that do not regard these

reproducible images as bearers of an original truth uninformed by its conditions of production? Or,

in other words, how does the colonial visual archive mediate the very mechanisms of recognition

and exclusion at this particular colonial juncture?

² See, for example, Alvarado, Margarita, *Los Pioneros Valcke: un siglo de fotografía en el sur de Chile*; Alvarado, Margarita, et. al, *Fueguinos: Imágenes del Fin del Mundo, siglos XIX y XX*; Alvarado, Margarita, et. al, *Mapuche Fotografías Siglos XIX y XX. Construcción y Montaje de un Imaginario*; Alvarado Margarita and Claudia Möller, *Memoria Visual e Imaginarios*; Pavez, Jorge and André Menard, *Mapuche y anglicanos: Vestigios fotográficos de la Misión Araucana de Kepe 1896-1908*.

In this essay, I revisit the series of Mapuche cabinet cards taken by Milet Ramírez in order to, first, historicize the production of Indigenous photography in Chile. I approach them historically because these images are part of a visual construction of the Chilean nation-state that racializes Mapuche bodies for their dispossession and extraction of land, culture, and history. For this reason, I'm not interested in focusing on Milet Ramírez as *the* source of meaning in my analysis. Instead, I heed to the historical production of social meaning about the Mapuche people through visual discourses during the process of Chilean settlement in Wallmapu in the late-nineteenth century.

Given the hypervisibility of this racialized and folkloric depiction of the Mapuche in these images, I turn to Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez's short film *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* (*The Metal Keeps Talking*, 2016) to contemplate possibilities of rupturing the colonial visual regime that regards and consumes the Mapuche people and their culture as objectified commodities and assimilable. For instance, on the exclusionary discourses and practices toward the Mapuche people, in *Lengua escorada* (2009), Rodrigo Rojas suggests that the image of the Mapuche has been "fossilized" and that this image is always in tension with the transcultural relations of Mapuche subjects. Advancing a longer historical perspective, the Comunidad de Historia Mapuche (2012, 2015) has approached the perpetuation of Mapuche oppression by thinking of colonialism as the condition of existence for *differential* projects of exclusion and extraction of Mapuche subjects and territories that have a *longue durée*. That is to say, an ongoing and changing structure of violent, excluding power, colonialism has been reproduced in different shapes from Spanish rule, Chilean republicanism, through liberal national citizenship, and to contemporary Chilean multicultural neoliberalism. Informed by the Comunidad de Historia Mapuche's theorization of colonialism as a reproducing and adapting mechanism of oppression and assimilation, I approach Huichaqueo Pérez's filmmaking to heed the ways he proposes to contest colonial forms of understanding Mapuche culture and history as he utilizes film to unlock the memories that were supposed to disappear with the modernizing frame of the Chilean nation-state and its extractive economy on Mapuche bodies and land.

Visual Economy of Indigenous Reproducible Portraiture: Framing the Mapuche People (1860-1900)

The autonomous and unexplored territories of the Mapuche people in Southern Chile arose as the only viable solution for the Chilean state and elites to the disastrous effects of the first world-wide financial crisis, the Panic of 1857. Historian Jorge Pinto argues that after losing the markets of California, Australia, and England, the Chilean agrarian and financial elites along with the state considered as a solution the effective occupation of Mapuche domains that had remained beyond the state borders in order to turn the land into private property from which wheat could be exported to Buenos Aires and the Atlantic (*La formación del Estado y la nación, y el pueblo Mapuche*, 138-207). As a means to have newer land to modernize and resources to extract, Chilean and European financial and agrarian capitalists and the Chilean state needed to impose themselves over the Mapuche people and their territories that had remained sovereign for centuries. Military campaigns started in 1861, which were named “Pacificación de la Araucanía.” This enforced the already enacted Selective Immigration Law of 1845 and accommodated mostly German as well as French, Italian, Polish and Russian settlers on previously Mapuche communal land. The military movement southward concluded in 1883 after twenty years of bloody war against Mapuche clans, the same year the War of the Pacific against Peru and Bolivia concluded. As a result of both military expansions, the Chilean state extended its territory to the northern regions, seizing Peruvian guano mines and Bolivian nitrate mines to hand them to English capitalists, and occupied southern regions to farm private patches of land that required “civilized” European settlers³.

The construction of new cities such as Temuco, Nueva Imperial, Traiguén in former Mapuche territories frames the opening of photographic studios. Indeed, Mapuche cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards created in photographic studios reproduce the colonization of the Mapuche people by the Chilean nation-state. That is, the serialized production of Mapuche portraiture in photographic ateliers—such as Gustavo Milet Ramírez’s (the focus of this essay), the Valck family, and Odber Heffer Bissett, among other photographers—requires the construction of Mapuche

3 See Comunidad de Historia Mapuche, *Ta Iñ Fijke Xipa Rakizumeluwun: Historia, Colonialismo, y Resistencia desde el país Mapuche* (2012) and *Aniikan Ka Kuxankan Zugu Wajmapu Mew: Violencias coloniales en Wajmapu* (2015); Mallon, Florencia E., *Courage Tastes of Blood* (2005); Millalén, José, et. al, *¡Escucha, winka!* (2006); Salazar, Gabriel *Mercaderes, empresarios y capitalistas (Chile, siglo XIX)* (2009).

models whose identity, clothes, and pose reflect on the modern political economy in southern Chile that presupposes the Mapuche people as excludable from land, rights, history, and culture for settlers to civilize, occupy and concretize the “national.”

Rather than considering these reproducible portraits of Mapuche people as the “staged visualization of a fantasy and dislocated memory [that was] intervened by the photographic modality of the fin de siècle,” as Margarita Alvarado explains in *Mapuche: Fotografías Siglos XIX y XX* (20-1), I observe these images as the materialization of colonial appropriations of Mapuche territories, bodies, and culture through a form of seeing. These images suture in their planar photographic surface a colonial visual regime with a modern political economy that sees Indigenous peoples as subjects whose culture, territories, and history can be commodified.

In *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, cultural anthropologist Deborah Poole writes that, to better understand the world created and represented by early photographs of Indigenous peoples in the postcolonial Andes, the concept “visual economy” suggests a systematic organization of the field of vision that “bears some—not necessarily direct—relationship to the political and class structure as well as to the production and exchange of the material goods or commodities that form the life blood of modernity” (8). Poole explains that because cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards were closely related to bourgeois forms of visual recognition, non-bourgeois portraiture were consumed in the same system of values and “were judged by the same canons of beauty, property, and physiognomy used to evaluate the bourgeois portrait” (133). Yet Indigenous bodies were sifted through prearranged poses, placed next to props, pinned with objects owned by the photographer, and remained anonymous. These images of Indigenous peoples reinforced “the legitimacy of these class-based canons of taste and distinction” and converted Indigenous images into “equivalent images of types” (133). The visual regime or visual economy that represents non-bourgeois, Indigenous models as mute and anonymous subjects acquires meaning and value as long as systems of classification and display assigned these images with value that legitimized non-Indigenous individuals.



Figure 4. “Indios Araucanos de Traiguen, Sud America, Chile”. Gustavo Milet Ramirez (c.1890)

In the case of Milet Ramirez’s portrait series, Mapuche portraiture emphasizes a visual economy that forces Mapuche bodies to become legible in their exploitation so as to rationalize Mapuche exclusion from their territories precisely because of their contrasting representation vis-à-vis white settlers. For instance, the cabinet card (Figs. 4) from the *Indios Araucanos* series depicts Mapuche women as controllable yet savage because of their sexualization, racialization, and typification in the photographic studio and the system of vision of the Chilean nation-state. In contrast to bourgeois subjects who willingly paid to have their individualized and identifiable portraits taken, little is known about the procedures that allowed these Mapuche women to pose in the photographer’s studio.

We know even less if their presence in front of the camera was paid, voluntary, forced or if the Mapuche models were given a copy of their portraits. It is certainly impossible to find out how the “woman who breastfeeds” in the *Indios Araucanos* series felt in front of the camera. However, considering that in the posing salon jewelry, utensils, dressing codes and postures were owned and controlled by the photographer, it is possible to assume the nakedness of the woman’s breast was imposed by Milet Ramirez, therefore, a visualization of the unequal relations of power that make possible these cabinet cards by sexualizing her body as a carnal referent in the modern-colonial visual regime.

It can also be pointed out these subjects carry the same silver jewelry from the previous portraits: the left woman wears the same silver earrings and one of the previously seen *trapelakucha* while the right woman has the other and the same *trarilongko* around her head. The suturing of the Mapuche women’s bodies in the staged photographic space creates a visual continuum that serializes their bodies as inseparably domestic, sexualized, racialized, and non-modern. This is because the anonymity conferred to these women models points to the particular photographic contract that

produces them as “types”—Indios Araucanos—in a larger collection allowing the photographers to appropriate the labor of the models and reproduce the social conditions that consider them as colonial subjects in recently occupied territories.

In front of the camera, Mapuche women repeatedly followed the French-Chilean photographer’s ideas for poses and passed the studio’s *trapelakucha*, *trailongko*, and *sekil* to each other. And, while these images project a visual regime that regarded them as constrained, racialized, and folklorized, these portraits at the same time have a visual effect that pushes our attention to imagine these Mapuche *pu lagmien*⁴ in between resistance and subjection.

Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez’s *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram: The Metal Keeps Talking*

A *ñaña*⁵ walks in the open countryside of Chol Chol surrounded by trees and sheep in Wallmapu⁶. Her movements and the wind make the *trarilongko* and *trapelakucha* she wears strike each of the silver plates. The tracking shot follows the Mapuche woman at her own pace. Her steps are audible, the jewelry clinks, and, every once in a while, the *ñaña* holds her *trapelakucha* from clattering. Suddenly, a cutaway shot shows a full moon at night and, then, the viewpoint shifts to an aerial shot that follows, as if the moon were recording like a camera, a younger *lagmien* walking towards a forest.

This first scene is part of contemporary Mapuche filmmaker Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez’s short film *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* (The Metal Keeps Talking). In 2016, Huichaqueo Pérez curated an exhibition at the Museo de Arte Precolombino in Santiago, Chile, that highlighted the artistry of *riütapes* or Mapuche jewelers as cultural agents who retell, through silver jewelry, the history of Mapuche resistance against colonization and genocide. This short film accompanied the exhibition.

After its opening scene, *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* continues aurally following a *lagmien* from behind while the clattering of the silver jewelry and the wind sound in the background. Then, from far up in the sky, the camera slowly descends into land approaching a Mapuche woman who awaits the moon-camera with both of her arms extended and with some offerings. The moon-

4 Women/Sisters in Mapudungun.

5 Elderly woman/grandmother in Mapudungun.

6 Mapuche territories occupied by the Chilean state.



Figure 5. Opening Scenes from *Chbi Rüttram Amulnei ñi Rüttram*, Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez (2016) camera gets very close to the *lagmien* but does not touch her. The woman is no longer in frame, but is replaced by a *peñi*⁷. The camera ascends again until the man who awaits with the same offerings and extended arms blends with the landscape. Much of the first scenes in *Chbi Rüttram* are nonnarrative and experimental visual documentations of the Wallmapu landscape, such as underwater scenes in a creek, fly-over and spinning shots of a river, or a long shot of a group of Mapuche men carrying torches in the middle of the night. These scenes are followed by the same *ñaña* from the first scene who now walks with a young girl. Both wear traditional Mapuche clothes and their own *trapelakucha* and *trarilongko*, which provide a jangling sound in the background.

In “Mapuche Mnemonics: Reversing the Colonial Gaze through New Visualities of Extractive Capitalism,” Macarena Gómez-Barris comments that Huichaqueo’s visual syntax is rich in pauses, interruptions, false starts, and strings of “seemingly unrelated sequences, without making any particular point.” This audiovisual composition explores “the range of possible meanings of indigeneity and cultural agency” that go beyond the liberal multicultural and folkloric grammar of Indigenous recognition required by the Chilean nation-state. Gómez-Barris writes that Huichaqueo

⁷ Man/Brother in Mapudungun.

Pérez's visual language of nonchronological time, image, and aural loops "ruptures with the representations of indigeneity as tame, conformist, past-oriented, and romantically restricted within a normative idealization of indigenous tradition" (97).

As discussed previously, *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* presents Mapuche women and men moving through their ancestral land in unison with the jangle of silver jewelry, wind, the moon, rivers and forests. The suturing of seemingly unrelated shots into a nonchronological time foregrounds Huichaqueo Pérez's decolonial approach to the audiovisual language as he brings together what the Chilean nation-state and extractive economies attempted to dismember during the military occupation of Mapuche territories and its civilian afterlife: the relationships between local Indigenous communities and the natural world. The nonchronological in *Chi Rüttram* functions to zoom into a nonteleological account of history that reimagines cultural practice as sites of social and sacred connections to disrupt colonial visual regimes and extractive political economies. The Mapuche non-professional actors, their cultural artifacts, the wind and the natural world rupture in front of Huichaqueo's camera the narrative of Indigenous disappearance that considered the Mapuche people as unfit for modernity, thus, disposable of land, culture, and history. This decolonial audiovisual grammar disengages from regimes of vision—such as those reproduced by Milet Ramírez's portraiture—that perceived Mapuche culture as objectified, "pacified," and defeated.

Clorinda Antinao, a Mapuche *rüttrafe* (jeweler), sings an *ül* (song) while she sews small silver beads into a black garment in the following scene of *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram*. The medium close shot focuses on Antinao's hands highlighting both the material and immaterial labor that creates Mapuche jewelry. After a couple of minutes, Clorinda Antinao stands up while singing and picks some *trapelakuchas* and a *trarilongko* (silver head band) up from a table. Her voice is joined by the already familiar metallic clinking. She holds a *trapelakucha* and sings to it. The silver jewelry sings back to her. She does the same with another silver pendant and then with a *trarilongko*. Antinao sings and converses with the jewelry for some seconds, and, afterwards, a cutaway shot presents a Mapuche *ñaña* dressed in traditional clothes and jewelry in black and white.

In “Rethinking the Digital Age” anthropologist Faye Ginsburg argues that Indigenous digital media makers and filmmakers utilize the audiovisual medium in ways that are distinct from the monopolized, mainstream, and serialized forms of Western visual production. Indigenous filmmakers, Ginsburg explains, approach the digital medium as “cultural activists” in order to “revivif[y] relationships to their lands, local languages, traditions, and histories, and [to articulate] community concerns.” Indigenous cultural activists attempt to “reverse processes through which aspects of their societies have been objectified, commodified, and appropriated; their media productions and writing are efforts to recover their histories, land rights, and knowledge bases as their own cultural property” (302). Consequently, Indigenous media practices contest historical forms of exclusion by not only focusing on the visual and narrative but extending these praxes to claims of cultural and political sovereignty against Western nation-states and economies. Moreover, the audiovisual contestation created by Indigenous filmmaking approaches history and representation *otherwise*. This cultural production is situated as a conscious effort to produce a visual regime that does away with colonial vision and teleology as Indigenous cultural activists’ audiovisual language disrupts logics of commodification, objectification, and dispossession. Thus, culture and



Figure 6. Clorinda Antinao sings and works in *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram*, Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez (2016)

its artifacts are not detached aesthetically pleasing commodities, but instantiations of a historical memory informed by colonialism, and, as such, in opposition to it. An example of this is the following scene with which I close this section.

Following the black and white cutaway shot, Clorinda Antinao translates and explains the *ñil* she performed in the previous scene. Looking at the camera, she says in Spanish,

I sang to the silver jewelry that it must keep talking. It must keep conversing and telling the history. It must keep joyfully going to the *nguillatunes* (celebratory ceremonies), to the *ngeikurevenes* (celebratory ceremonies for *rewes*, Mapuche sacred altar) and that in all the Mapuche ceremonies, it must be with its guardian singing, dancing, talking and *gathering the history of the Mapuche people*. Because in this silver jewelry there is a history: a sad history, but also there is a beautiful history... So I sang and asked the jewelry how many *nguillatunes* it has been part of; in how many ceremonies it danced; in how many Mapuche meetings it participated. How much history it has. It could tell me the history, it could talk to me, tell me in how many ceremonies it was dancing, giving off its sounds, making people happy, making the earth and nature more beautiful. That's what I sang to it. And that it must speak in Mapudungun. (my translation and emphasis)

Clorinda Antinao and Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez perform cultural praxes that, through the artistry of Mapuche silver jewelry and audiovisual language, cross the limits of a memory and archive that is “not solely a repository of wounds, traumas, and victimization of authoritarianism but also an activator of forms of expressive resistance to [ongoing] colonization” as Gómez-Barris states in “Mapuche Mnemonics” (94). The approach to history that is articulated in *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* allows for an exploration of aural and embodied memories that escape the limitations of controlled representations of Indigeneity—such as Milet Ramírez’s portrait series—that overpopulate the visual archive of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, Huichaqueo’s audiovisual language underscores the relationships Mapuche culture produces between human and non-human voices and modes of being that had remained excluded from the modern archive and its memory.

Conclusion: Interrupting the Colonial Gaze

The historiographical work I have performed by bringing together Gustavo Milet Ramírez's photograph series of Mapuche women and Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez's *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* attempts to read the colonial archive of the Mapuche people *otherwise*. Modern-colonial visual regimes have a prosperous afterlife that enable the silencing of Indigenous forms of history and reproduction of neocolonial extractivism. Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez's *Chi Rüttram Amulniei ñi Rüttram* experiments with Mapuche cultural production to explore other forms of history that retell colonization and extreme violence against Indigenous peoples materially and aurally. Hence, to observe the anonymous Mapuche *pu lagmien* pose in Milet Ramírez's photographic atelier would mean to open up imaginative perspectives on how to approach these subjects and observe and listen to their gazes and the silver jewelry that was exchanged with each other. Sad and beautiful histories, as Clorinda Antinao sings. This historiographical approach would move towards a recovery of Indigenous memories and knowledge that contest obliteration, dispossession, and colonial trauma.

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