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'A poem about my country' features courtesy of its author, who goes by the pen-name Puetasubterraneo. The English translation is by Igor Stipić

# People from the Land: A High school story of the Mapuche Indigenous people in Chile

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This piece traces the identity transformation of two high school students in Chile who were involved in protest movements and eventually came to identify as indigenous Mapuche. In his approach, Igor Stipić's combines a *longue-durée* historical perspective with an ethnographic approach to biography that entangles individual identity formation with relations to national discourses, colonial legacies, the environment and neoliberal economic extractivism.

The text is based on extensive fieldwork conducted in Chile as part of Igor Stipić's doctoral research at the Leibniz ScienceCampus.

This post concludes with 'A poem about my country' by Puetasubteraneo (Spanish: Poet from underground). The poem is featured by kind permission of its author, a student at the high school researched by Igor Stipić.



*Photo 1: A poster with members of Mapuche people in a classroom of Liceo de Aplicación with the question: Community?*

*The poster incorporates images available in the public domain: Lonco mapuche Lloncon, ca. 1890 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cacique\\_Lloncon\\_aprox.\\_1890.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cacique_Lloncon_aprox._1890.jpg)) and Mujer mapuche con joyas de plata, ca. 1890 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mujer\\_Mapuche.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mujer_Mapuche.jpg)).*

On 3 January 2008, Matías Catrileo, a former student of *Liceo Lastarria* high school in Santiago, was killed in a shootout with the Chilean police in the region of Araucanía while he was trying, as a member of the Organization Arauco Malleco (CAM), to occupy the land in possession of Luchsinger-Mackay family. Thirteen years later, in July 2021, Pablo Marchant, former student of the *Instituto Nacional* in Santiago, experienced an identical fate while he attempted to occupy the land owned by the company Mininco Forests. During their ideological transformation, these two young men embarked on a journey that not only took them 700km south of the capital, but also far away from Chilean national identity, which they rejected to such a degree that they declared themselves members of the indigenous Mapuche people. Matías and Pablo sealed their identity transformation by joining Arauco Malleco, the most radical political organization of Mapuche people.

Before returning to their story, one that remains embedded within a history whose point is located in the depths of time, I will briefly outline who the indigenous people to which our protagonists declared their allegiance are.

Matias and Pablo also shared a critique that takes contemporary Chile as a construction with rotten foundations, a society whose present is largely determined by the neoliberal cultural model in which economic calculation, natural destruction, and individualism rule the game of the day.

## The Longue-Durée of Mapuche-Chilean relations

Mapuche (mapu = land; che = people), or people from the land, are a South American indigenous tribe that historically inhabited southern parts of present-day Argentina and Chile. The fact that the Mapuche were the only indigenous people who were never subjugated by the Spanish Kingdom in Southern America today is a historical curiosity that also plays an important role in popular knowledge. Thus, until the second half of the nineteenth century, the Mapuche had a form of an independent state on the territory of this continent, losing their political and territorial autonomy only after the South American wars of independence, when the newly formed states of Argentina and Chile defeated them in military conflicts. In the specific case of Chile, the Mapuche lost their independence in 1861 in a conflict that the Chilean state euphemistically named “Pacification”. Although in contemporary Chile the largest number of Mapuche people live in the capital city of Santiago (35.2% of the entire Mapuche population)[1], Araucanía and Wallmapu (Mapudungun: Mapuche land) is considered their historical region. It is here that autonomist politics finds its deepest and most radical roots. The name of the region given to it by the official state is linked to the Chilean national epic *La Araucana*, written in sixteenth century by the Spanish conquistador Alonso de Ercilla, in which he discusses the conquest of present-day Chile.

Within the Chilean national identity building process, the Mapuche, just like other indigenous people, were given the role of a familiar yet unwanted Other. While the Chilean state-building narrative embraced the heroic resistance of the Mapuche people against Spanish rule (having later attributed this trait to the Chilean national ideal as well), Mapuche culture was deemed an undesirable part of the imagined national being. With this in mind, the national narrative formed in the nineteenth century characterized Mapuche as an inferior culture, a “slave race” consisting of men who are “barely superior to the animal”.<sup>[2]</sup> Domingo Sarmiento, an influential Argentinian statesman and philosopher exiled in Chile, described the indigenous population as “an untamable brute, enemy of the civilization that adores all the vices in which he lives submerged, idleness, intoxication, lie, betrayal and all that sum of abominations that constitute the life of a savage”.<sup>[3]</sup> In this sense, the Mapuche people assumed the role of the main internal enemy against which the nation had to be built, coming to represent the biggest obstacle for further national development and Chile’s successful entry into political and economic modernity.

In response to the abovementioned “problem”, national elites began propagating the idea that successfully entering modernity and further development of the Chilean state and society was possible only if the local indigenous character was replaced with a European one. Guided by this worldview, the oligarchic creole elites who became prominent in the newly independent state, advanced an official policy of “improving the race” and “whitening the nation”.<sup>[4]</sup> This policy was conducted through the program that instigated immigration from Europe through distribution of lands previously taken from indigenous people. Thus, the Luchsinger family, the same one whose descendants were attacked by Matías Catrileo on 3 January 2008, probably arrived in Araucanía from Switzerland a little after 1883, the year when this land was effectively taken from Mapuche people.<sup>[5]</sup>

Throughout history, significant parts of Mapuche lands would pass into the hands of local and transnational capitalists, who to this very day continue to implement extractivist economic policies in these territories. Within this context, the action in which Pablo Marchant was killed occurred on the property of the Matta family, one of the five richest in Chile, that controls more than 700,000 hectares of pine monoculture forest.<sup>[6]</sup> In recent years, various social and environmental organizations have increased pressure on the Chilean state to end the monocultural model of development led by large companies such as Mininco Forests, warning that this strategy has serious consequences for the whole society. This is because it leads to water shortages, drought, soil impoverishment, displacement of rural populations, loss of food sovereignty, and destruction of indigenous forests, flora and fauna, ecosystems, wetlands, and the proliferation of numerous causes of fires. The most radical opponent of these companies in Araucanía is Arauco Malleco, an organization that supports armed struggle as the only way towards recovering land and autonomy. Chilean state authorities have declared CAM as a terrorist organization.



*Photo 2: Matías Catrileo's graffiti along the river Mapocho in Santiago de Chile with the message: "We are not Chileans. We are Mapuche. Freedom for Wallmapu".*

## **Chilean, Mestizo, or Mapuche: The body as site of resistance?**

A brief look at biographies of our two protagonists further complicates this story and makes it even more intriguing. Namely, birth certificates and similar documents from Matías' and Pablo's family archive cannot unequivocally confirm their belonging to the Mapuche people. Indeed, the most straightforward formula would show that both of them are, like most Chileans, of mixed *mestizo* origin. While Matías proved his Mapuche origin through his father's surname Catrileo (his mother has a Spanish surname Quezada), Pablo did not have the same type of proof because no member of his family bears a surname typical of the Mapuche people (his last name Marchant originates from France and means merchant). At the same time, it is difficult to assert that Matías Catrileo – both due to his appearance and his last name (very reminiscent of Italian) – belonged to that part of the Mapuche population that suffers daily discrimination.<sup>[7]</sup>

Taking this into account, I think that we can try another road, and see what happens if we read the conversion towards Mapuche identity of these two young men through their affiliation with high school countercultural circles. While Matías was part of the anarchist and punk scene in Santiago during his high school days, Pablo belonged to the Lautaro Youth Movement (MJL), one of the most radical and secretive youth political associations. It is named after the main Mapuche historical hero and one of the protagonists of the national epic *La Araucana*. Pablo Marchant's rebellious attitude towards the system in which he grew up could also be seen on his LinkedIn profile, where under the employment category it is stated: "unemployed in any place".<sup>[8]</sup> Equally, bearing in mind hybridity of Latin American identities, it is interesting to note that the Lautaro Youth Movement developed as the most radicalized sector of the Christian-left party MAPU, that itself split from the Christian Democrats under the influence of liberation theology only a year before Salvador Allende became President of Chile in 1973.

Furthermore, it is evident that *mestizaje* – as a practice of cultural mixing that places both characters of this story, as well as the majority of the Chilean population, in a space where the two worlds of oppressor and the oppressed meet – offers various identity options for those who are born within such socio-cultural contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the identity that these two young men chose as their own is still an anomaly in a country where, mainly due to the historical ideology of national whitening, as many as 60% of the population declare themselves as white<sup>[9]</sup> (although I found it very difficult to confirm this high percentage, especially on the streets of the city I lived for two years). This consequently leads me to consider how identity questions, especially when tackled by teenagers who grew up in an urban environment, carry much deeper meaning and complexity.

it is important that we take into account the emotional and moral appeal that revolutionary indigenous politics offers to adolescents, both in Chile and in other parts of the world. [... Any of the students with whom I shared the school space on a daily basis could one day turn into the next Pablo or Matías, becoming yet another young person who makes their way into radical politics, taking the long road that drives them from Santiago to the south of the country, to join the political movement of the people whose story represents the historical opposite of everything that Chile has become.

Based on my fieldwork experience at the *Liceo de Aplicación* high school in Santiago, where I met many people that commemorate and respect what Pablo and Matías did, I argue that the young men's personal stories remain inseparable from the understanding young people more generally develop about the larger context of the country in which they grew up. Here I take a hint from the various rebellious and radicalized students I met during my stay in Santiago, and suggest that Matias and Pablo also shared a critique that treats contemporary Chile as a construction with rotten foundations, a society whose present is largely determined by the neoliberal cultural model in which economic calculation, natural destruction, and individualism rule the day.

Within this context, the indigenous movement in Latin America, taken as a wave that engulfed the two young men from our story, should not be only read as a place of ethno-identity liberation but also as a site where many young minds can express resistance against what they see as rigid reality in which they grow up. Because of this, I think it is important that we take into account the emotional and moral appeal that revolutionary indigenous politics offers to adolescents, both in Chile and in other parts of the world. While studying the lives of rebellious youth at the *Liceo de Aplicación* high school, many times I came to reflect on how any of the students with whom I shared the school space on a daily basis could one day turn into the next Pablo or Matías, becoming yet another young person who makes their way into radical politics, taking the long road that drives them from Santiago to the south of the

country, to join the political movement of the people whose story represents the historical opposite of everything that Chile has become.



*Photo 3: Student of Liceo de Aplicación high school protest on 11th October 2022. Officially, this day marks Colombo's arrival to the "New World" and is known the "Race Day". In the case of protesting students, the day is known as the "Day of Mapuche Resistance". The banner reads: Immediate freedom for all Mapuche political prisoners (in Spanish). Our struggle continues. We will win ten and thousand times (in Mapundungun, language of Mapuche people).*

## **Instead of a conclusion: 'A Poem about my country' by Puetasubterraneo**

This poem, which is at the same time the conclusion of my text, is the work of one high school student from Santiago. He says that through this poem "he wants to show the melancholy of a country that was stolen through spilled blood and private property." I am grateful for his permission to share his poem.

### **Puetasubterraneo (Spanish: Poet from underground)**

#### ***A poem about my country***

This is the same country  
in which they killed Matías Catrileo  
in which Eduardo Miño<sup>[10]</sup> set himself on fire  
in which they executed Manuel Guerrero<sup>[11]</sup>.  
This land, that once was the fruit of love

was filled with agony and crying when she felt that burning,  
this homeland that once belonged to us  
now can only cry because of indifference.  
The rivers of our world are no longer the same  
they are no longer rich, they have become deserts.  
Money rules in this homeland  
here where poetry was once nurtured.  
Today we can only watch with melancholy  
this land that our ancestors protected for us  
today we can only imagine that blue lake  
which used to be a gentle blanket for the abandoned.  
I can only promise you one thing, my beloved land  
that I will fight and sing so that you become golden again  
and that I will carry within me the conviction of one who has never given up  
because an oppressed nation, is a nation without future.

*English translation by Igor Stipić*

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## Notes

[1] Navarro, Sofia (08.05.2018). Region Metropolitana concentra mayor población mapuche del país. Accessed [04.11.2022]. Retrieved from <https://radio.uchile.cl/2018/05/08/region-metropolitana-concentra-mayor-poblacion-mapuche-a-nivel-nacional/>

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<https://argentina.indymedia.org/2021/07/10/chile-detras-de-la-muerte-de-joven-mapuche-conflicto-forestal-de-mininco-cmpc/>

[7] Pairican, F. (2017). La biografía de Matías Catrileo. Santiago: Pehuén Editores.

[8] Pairican, F. (2017). La biografía de Matías Catrileo. Santiago: Pehuén Editores.

[9] Corporación Latinobarómetro (2011). Informe 2011: Banco de datos en Línea.  
[www.latinobarometro.org](http://www.latinobarometro.org)

[10] Dissatisfied with what Chile has turned into in the aftermath of dictatorship, Eduardo Miño set himself on fire in 2001 in front of the presidential palace in Santiago, just after leaving a note for passers-by that read: "My soul, which overwhelms humanity, can no longer bear such injustice."

[11] Manuel Guerrero was a professor and member of the Communist Party of Chile who was killed by the secret police in 1985.

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Igor Stipić holds an MA in Political and Social Studies from the University of Alberto Hurtado in Santiago de Chile and another MA in Political Economy from the University of Economics in Prague. After finishing his master's studies, Igor worked for four years as a Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Köszeg (iASK), where he also lectured on the International Studies MA program at the University of Pannonia (Hungary). Currently, Mr. Stipić is a doctoral candidate in Sociology and Political Anthropology at the University of Regensburg and Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS). His doctoral research project is titled *The State and its Students: Hegemonic structures, subaltern pedagogies and fractured community in Bosnia and Chile*. It adopts an ethnographic approach to studying anti-hegemonic high-school social movements in the two societies, while also making both subaltern and critical theory-based contributions for studying social formations known as nation-states. In his work Igor engages with interdisciplinary approaches, combining insights from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and critical theory. His research focuses on South East Europe and South America.

[Website](#)