
TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY WITH *FLOW*: STEPS TO GO BEYOND THE 'ONTOLOGICAL TURN'

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ABSTRACT

The work explores and discusses a key argument of the 'ontological turn' in anthropology: the call to go beyond cultural relativism, 'taking seriously' the ontological assumptions of the collectives under study. While this idea has been fruitful in problematizing modern dualisms that are one of the foundations of contemporary social theory, it has derived -in many of its developments- into an intellectualism of philosophical imprint and certain conservatism centered (still) on the written monograph. This inhibits, or at least reduces the radicalization of the apertures proposed by the 'ontological turn'. Through the lessons arising in a research experience with young rappers in a Mapuche community in the coastal area of Valdivia (Región de los Ríos, Chile) between 2017 and 2019, we see the relevance of literally becoming engaged in the practices of the inhabitants of the territories where the ethnography takes place. The focus is centered on following the course of actions involved in the construction of a rap video clip dealing with environmental and territorial issues, highlighting the yield achieved methodologically -and not strictly conceptual- entailed by 'taking seriously' the ontological assumptions of others and the creative manners in which they perform their worlds.

KEYWORDS

Chile, Mapuche, rap music, ontological turn, music video clip

BIO

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I. Introduction

“*Flow* is the way you follow a rap beat with your voice. Everyone has their own *flow*”, explains the Mapuche Lafkenche¹ rapper Jakase Mc². He was part of a group of young rappers who join a project centered in the making of a rap³ video clip dealing with the different environmental conflicts faced by the coastal communities of Valdivia, in the central southern area of Chile. This area has begun to be called Wadalafken Mapu by Mapuche Lafkenche inhabitants, many of whom view developing or latent extractivist activities as a threat upon their territory. The video clip project was led by the Mapuche leader and rapper Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca of the Lof Michillanca of Los Molinos -located within the Wadalafken Mapu-, who conceives and practices rap as a form of defense, insofar as it is a way of spreading information on different levels (local, national and global) that allows the inclusion of people - who have an affinity for this music genre- in territorial guardianship. Between 2017 and 2018 the different phases leading to the video clip titled “Nuestro Territorio” [“Our Territory”] were conceptualized and developed in the community *ruka*⁴ (see image 1) which to date has been viewed over 25,000 times on its fan page.⁵



FIGURE 1: Exterior of *Ruka* Lof Michillanca community of Los Molinos. Source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2017.

¹ The Mapuche (‘people of the land’) are the most numerous indigenous group in Chile. In the area under study the term ‘Lafkenche’ (‘sea people’) is added since they inhabit the coastal areas. It is worth mentioning that in the Mapuche language, *mapudungun* (‘language of the land’), the ‘s’ is not used for the plural form.

² From here on, except for Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca and Miguel Montaña Pichún, we will use the rapper names for those who appear in the video clip.

³ Access link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTfzTgA4Gag&t>

⁴ The *ruka* is the traditional Mapuche dwelling. Currently it is not used extensively as a residence. But for varied cultural actions and political organization (see Carmona 2017).

⁵ Access link: <https://www.facebook.com/proyectorapmapucherural2017/videos/1979384875442284/>

Our insertion as ethnographers began with the aim of investigating the way Mapuche groups were confronting the possible installation of an eolic power plant in a forest conservation area⁶. It then became a theoretic, experiential, and experimental voyage. While we relied theoretically on the ‘ontological turn’ (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), the position of taking this perspective ‘seriously’, in other words, of radicalizing its assumptions, led us to attend to its limitations and to discern possibilities for broadening its imaginative spectrum and the practices conventionally established by its practitioners. We became involved in a world that was unknown to us, that of hip hop, having to immerse ourselves in the flow of actions of our new acquaintances until ‘the very end’. From there on the investigation took on an experimental imprint, the main product was a video clip, one of the genres manifestations held in high esteem by our hip-hoppers and increasingly used by different rappers around the world due to easy access to technology. Therefore, this article corresponds to a side product serving as a chronicle of our lived experience, as well as of the lessons that seem relevant to share. The results emphasizing the lived experience also may be read as a critical review of the ‘ontological turn’, as it points to some of its rich possibilities that have not yet been entirely explored.

The ‘ontological turn’ corresponds to one of the most vigorous and debated theoretic perspectives in current anthropology. It emphasizes dimensions referred to being and to the nature of reality in its investigative approach (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Its core is the knowledge built around the problematization of modern dualisms, especially that of nature and culture (Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2011). Furthermore, it concedes special importance to the task of conceptualization, ideally, around the relation with ‘radical alterity’ and sustained by ethnographic undertakings (Holbraad 2014).

One of the main features of this perspective is the critique of cultural relativism⁷. In other words, it is understood that modern ontological assumptions present in the areas where anthropological knowledge is conventionally produced -Descola’s (2013) ‘naturalism’ for example- hinder the understanding of collectives having other assumptions. From the works on this perspective, the concept of nature as a universal and common backdrop of singular cultural perspectives is questioned from findings in the field (Viveiros de Castro 2011). However, more than invalidating modern ontological assumptions, what it seeks is its relocation, building a theoretical space for better comprehension of those collectives not situated in them⁸ and an empiric, non-relativist, affirmation of plural, interwoven realities (De la Cadena 2015, Blaser 2009).

Another main guideline has been the adoption of the ethnography as an instrument for theorization. In other words, its use has been underlined not only as an approach to fieldwork or a strategy for textual representation. The main point is that it has sought to reformulate its statute within the investigative process: for a subsidiary and instrumental position *under* established theory erected at a privileged moment in the construction of knowledge and a motor of the anthropological discipline. As stated by Holbraad,

The central movement of this ontological turn is just that: a permanent intent to turn the relationship between ethnographic material and analytical resources on its head. Instead of treating the ethnography as the object of analytical concepts and procedures, the ontological turn treats the ethnography as its *source*. Thus, the ethnography has become the foundation, not merely in the field, upon which anthropology renews its resources and an intellectual project [cursive in original and our translation]. (Holbraad 2014: 132)

Although the perspective of the ‘ontological turn’ has radicalized the anthropological exercise, creating theoretic conditions to overcome modern divisions in analysis, prioritizing ethnographic undertakings, it has important limitations that must be attended to. For reasons of analytical focus and space we are interested in discussing two⁹: on one hand, the emphasis on conceptualization destined to capture the complexity and singularity of studied groups has derived in a strong philosophical and

⁶ This Project was called Parque Eólico Pililín, by a Spanish corporation called Acciona. The main affectations were associated to impacts produced by the installation of 17 aero generators in a hillside forest of high cultural and biological value, as well as 22 kilometers of power lines. The project was presented in 2016 and retired in 2018 due to local and regional opposition.

⁷ Has become common sense in anthropological discipline since the influence of Franz Boas in the North American academic field (see Stocking 1966)

⁸ For proposals of “long-range” (Merton 1959) see the “four ontology model” of Descola (2013) the “Amerindian Perspectivism” of Viveiros de Castro (2011).

⁹ Other critics may be found in Besire and Bond (2014) and Reynoso (2014)

abstract imprint, and on the other, as a concrete result of ethnographic undertakings, the written monograph persists as a predominant and paradigmatic product, centered on representational attributes of experience¹⁰. The result has tended to disregard concrete practices and the creativity of social actors, reducing possibilities of opening new opportunities to ethnographic work.

In this body of work, while we subscribe to the ‘ontological turn’, we intend to take steps to explore beyond it. We state that a central aspect of anthropological work, and within it the ethnography, is -as sustained by the main proponents of the ‘turn’- to “take seriously” the assumptions about reality sustained by others. Nevertheless, it is not circumscribed *only* to an intellectual level and therefore engrossed, not only with conceptual and/or representational preciosity, but also methodological¹¹, experiential and experimental. Therefore we understand researchers insertion in the practices and creations of the people with whom we work, to paraphrase the main proponents of the ‘ontological turn’ (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), to the ‘last consequences’. That is, from the steps before the research itself to the materiality of the final products, its dissemination and even its extension towards new relations that affect and disaffect those who participate in the process. At this point, the theoretic-methodologic dialogue opens before -or alongside- philosophy, to a wide range of proposals that problematize the division between researcher/researched and/or the univocality of the research results, which are preeminently written.

The allusion to ‘an anthropology with *flow*’ synthesizes our argument with the case we will treat as material for thought and involvement: the process of making the hip-hop video clip “Nuestro Territorio” [“Our Territory”], developed mainly in the Lof Michillanca community of Los Molinos. Although it took place between June 2017 and December 2018, our comprehension involved background work that took place between 2016 and 2019 in the coastal area of Valdivia (Wadalafken Mapu), located in the southern Región de los Ríos, Chile. In keeping with Mc Jakase’s definition of *flow* we strive for anthropology where one of the main characteristics is a close link to the practices and interests of the place and is modeled -literally and concretely- on the singularity and creativity of the people that inhabit it.

In the following chapters we divide our experience in two moments: the first, after presenting the background of our principal counterpart (turned into creative partner) and the area under study, we expose the four phases of making of the video clip: i) reflexive workshops for writing the lyrics and audiovisual script, ii) building the song, iii) building the audio visual content and iv) dissemination. In the second half of this work we propose two lines of analysis: one *within* the ‘ontological turn’, from a political ontology perspective, another wondering *beyond* it, through the problematization of the researcher/researched dichotomy and written text as the paradigmatic and previously established product of the ethnography.

II. The coming into being of a video clip

In this section the process of building the video clip is described. First, information about the “constructive negotiation” (Clifford 1988: 41) established with Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca for the joint endeavor is given, as well as his biography and historical-political background of the area where the community he is leader of is located. Following that, the four phases for the making of the video clip are presented.

Gabriel and the Lof Michillanca video clip

We met Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca in the context of a meeting of local Mapuche Lafkenche communities that took place in his community’s *ruka* on the 11th of March of 2017. We spoke briefly during breaks in the program. We explained our research objective, involving the social opposition to a

¹⁰ Other formats are used, but they are subservient to what has already been exposed in written form. For example, the exposition ‘La fabrique des images’ (2010-2011) in the Quai Branly (Paris, France), who’s commissar was Descola, or the photography exposition ‘Variações do corpo selvagem’ (2015) at the SESC (São Paulo, Brazil) by Viveiros de Castro.

¹¹ Furthermore, it is fundamental to state that we do not understand methodology as a series of standardized previously established steps, but as a group of decisions that implicate the situated definition and eventually the creation of procedures in consideration with the context and purpose of the study.

wind farm project in the area and our interest in building a relevant product for the people who participated, that was not necessarily in written form. He told us that he had been raised in the suburbs of Santiago¹², the capital of Chile, and it was there, along with his friends, that he had grown to love hip-hop¹³. Especially one of its expressions: rap. That is why, since his return and permanent settlement in the community in 2010, he has always wanted to condition a rustic building on the property for a music studio. “For me rap is a tool for the struggle” was one of the phrases he pointed at us that day. When asked in what sense he explained: “rap is a way of spreading information about what happens in the territories and it makes more people, especially young people, join the defense. For example, I know many *peñitos* [young men] from here, including neighbors of mine who are not involved and don’t know what’s happening, but they’re rappers or they like rap a lot. So that way, with music, they could see what’s happening and contribute”. He commented that, besides the environmental conflicts that affect the territory in general -and that were the thematic focus of that day’s meeting-, there was a specific concern with land claims in his community.

A brief historical note is necessary. Until the advance of the Chilean Army during the second half of the XIXth century, in a process known as the ‘Pacification of the Araucanía’, the Mapuche people were relatively autonomous. Later the Chilean state granted them land consisting of 10% of the total territory they had previously inhabited (Mariman et al. 2006). In the case of the area where the Lof Michillanca is located¹⁴, this occurred in 1912. In 1974, at the beginning of Chilean dictatorship (1973-1989), the property Gabriel referred to that day was usurped through a fraudulent procedure (Correa 2015). Due to the precariousness of those times Gabriel’s mother had to migrate to the suburbs of Santiago de Chile, where Gabriel was born, raised and learned about rap.

His family began legal actions to recuperate this land in the year 2000, mainly settling on it and being turned out by the public force on numerous occasions. In fact, one of these oustings took place during the time the video clip was being worked on¹⁵. Meanwhile Gabriel settled on his family land permanently in 2010 and became a community leader. During the different actions for recuperating the property he has forged relations with other leaders and Mapuche groups in this and other localities, allowing him to be an insider to the different environmental problems in the area. A declaration at an event called “Defense of the Lafken Mapu” (Kiñe Rakizuam and Lof Michillanca 2017) where some of these issues were discussed, stated: “This advance [of extractive industries] takes place from the mountains to the sea, hydroelectric plants, forestry, mining, agro industries, cellulose, mega wind farms and salmon farming; projects that threaten the right to good living, the cultural identity as Mapuche Nation People”.

We met with Gabriel eight times in order to coordinate a joint action-research effort. It was decided that the idea of building a studio would be left for the future. Instead, we decided to draw up a joint proposal and apply for a small grant (USD 530)¹⁶ for academic extension offered by the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities of the Universidad Austral de Chile (UACH) in 2017. Finally, we received the grant for a project centered on building a rap video clip. The title was “Rural Mapuche Rap in the Context of Environmental Conflicts” under the responsibility of Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca and the first author of this article, the anthropologist Pablo Rojas Bahamonde. It is relevant to note another participant in this project¹⁷, a rapper from the city of Valdivia known as Tormento Vil Dos Mañas who was to be in charge of building the song and allowed the use of his technical equipment, as well as

¹² Currently the majority of the Mapuche population inhabits urban areas, especially in the city of Santiago.

¹³ Hip-hop culture is composed, at least, of the following manifestations: rap, *graffiti*, break dance and *Djing*.

¹⁴ Although the community is registered under a different name in the Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena (CONADI) – a government agency centered on issues having to do with indigenous people, created through legislation in 1993 (see Vergara et al. 2004) – throughout this article we opt for the name used by the people we worked with. “Lof” designates a level of sociopolitical organization present among the Mapuche before the ‘Pacification of the Araucanía’ for a group of extended family. It is also important to mention that the word ‘community’ has different meanings, it may refer to a Mapuche organization before the ‘Pacification’, one emerging after regularization by the Chilean state and/or one established by CONADI. Lof Michillanca is a combination of the first two.

¹⁵ See: <https://radiojgm.uchile.cl/con-ff-ee-y-maquinarías-pesadas-desalojan-y-destruyen-lof-michillanca/>

¹⁶ Used for transport and meals.

¹⁷ Originally there would also have been two students of journalism in charge of audiovisual work and three postgraduate students, who would help in the design of the workshops.

contributing with his vast experience¹⁸. Gabriel had met him at a gig where Tormento offered his support.

We would like to mention two of the many issues that emerged during the process of coordination. First, Gabriel exposed that there were two basic conditions for working together. First, there could be no situations that he termed as “epistemological extractivism”. He explained that from the very first, whatever we did must be useful for the people involved. This is associated to an extended problem within the Mapuche world, and indigenous communities in general, related to the instrumentalization and exploitation that many university students and researchers are accused of: “We make agreements with university people, we give them information, they do their thesis or projects and we never see them again, they don’t give back as much as a miserable piece of paper”, as another community leader stated in a conversation to illustrate this point. Also, there could be no censure or arbitrary editorial management on our part. Gabriel spoke of failed experiences with counterparts who wanted to project a stereotyped image of rural Mapuche life, as guardians of nature and possessing mystic ancestral wisdom.

It was decided that the construction of the video clip would take place in four phases described as follows.

i) Rapping

The workshops took place inside the *ruka* of the Lof Michillanca (see figure 2), and were about six hours long. The participants were also those who appeared in the video clip (here on after to be known as participants), as well as their family members and friends. The composition was as mentioned above, mostly Mapuche: Jakase Mc and Mono, both from Los Molinos, and Miguel Montaña Pichún, from the neighboring locality of San Ignacio; Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca (Siete Desobediencia) and his nephew, El Mapu, who had arrived from Santiago and were members of Lof Michillanca. Their ages fluctuated between 21 and 29. Two people from the Chilean world also joined: the Chilean rapper Tormento Vil Dos Mañas from the city of Valdivia and a ranchera singer known as Maura de Los Ríos from Los Molinos. Each workshop began by sharing a meal prepared by Gabriel and Pablo, in order to create an atmosphere of camaraderie and also due to the fact that some participants arrived after their working day.



FIGURE 2: Inside the Lof Michillanca community *ruka* during a rap workshop, source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2017.

¹⁸ This included workshops for socially vulnerable youth and songs and records with other rappers as well as singles. This work may be consulted here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/1raperoto>

The content of the first workshop consisted of an introduction of the participants and their motivations. Following, Gabriel gave a justification for the video clip, given the importance of creating awareness of environmental issues in the area, which he described in detail (see figure 3) Then, Pablo expressed the research framework and the four phases that had been thought out. Three agreements were reached: the creating of a Facebook account¹⁹ for the project, in order to share information about the different activities; that all the issues outlined by Gabriel could be touched upon, as well as other ones that may arise during the development of the project. Therefore, the subject matter would not be circumscribed to the eolic power plant project that our query had begun with. It was also agreed that swearing would not be used to reach a wider audience. Around these last two points, the participants discussed ethical-political aspects of rap that would guide them through the different phases, especially while building the lyrics. These consisted of the crucial importance given to the values of authenticity and autonomy. The first as understood as a critical and reflective exercise, in which each rapper is situated in a specific historic-political context, the lyrics should stem from that singular world view. Invariably, the narratives present in the music and/or audio-visual content was linked to their biographic narrative. Thus, for example, they expressed profound disgust with rappers who came from socially marginal backgrounds and who show luxurious scenarios in their videos, with no biographical references. The second point was the precedence granted to the individuality (not individualism) of the creative act. Advice or recommendation might be given, but no one would interfere with the characteristics of the lyrics or the manner in which the rapper might interpret them. “Rap is a piece of land where you plant what you want and tend to it however you like, whenever you like”, Miguel Montaña Pichún explained in that first workshop.



FIGURE 3: Conversation inside the *ruka* of Lof Michillanca of Los Molinos. Source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2017.

The following seven workshops followed a similar pattern. The rapper Tormento Vil Dos Mañas installed the equipment: a computer with a recording program, microphone, and speaker, with the

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/proyectorapmapucherural2017/>

volume of the beat²⁰ turned up loud, booming in the *ruka*. In this context the participants created; by writing lyrics in a notebook, making sounds out loud and having conversations with other members of the group. These actions took place seated, (see figure 4) or standing up, even walking within the *ruka*. After two hours of these activities the participants would congregate before the microphone to share their creations. All interventions were patiently recorded by Tormento Vil Dos Mañas (see figure 5). If deemed to be of a certain quality -where the most relevant opinion was that of the creator himself-, the intervention was inserted in the collective track, which was created during the successive workshops. Participants who had registered their work then helped their fellows. Finally, there was moment of collective appreciation in which the song was listened to at least half a dozen times, regardless of the state it was in. Each time it was reproduced there were comments, on possible improvements in quality or aiming towards the characteristics of the final assembly. Each work session concluded in a relaxed atmosphere, listening to rap music from the central-southern region of Chile. There would be talk about the characteristics of the video clip and invariably there would be collective freestyling²¹ around the open hearth of the *ruka*.



FIGURE 4: Writing during creative process inside *ruka* of the Lof Michillanca community source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2017.

²⁰ The beat was chosen and donated by *Tormento Vil Dos Mañas* in accordance with conversations that took place in the first workshop. It was unanimously approved by the participants, who found its intensity and aggressiveness adequate for the video clip they wanted to build.

²¹ The English slang word *Freestyling* is hispanicized to *freestylear*. Referring to the collective improvised, rhyming songs.



FIGURE 5: *Tormento Vil Dos Mañas* and *Maura de Los Ríos* inside the *ruka* Lof Michillanca. Source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2017.

ii) Mixing

While the song was built and registered in the workshops in the *ruka*, the final mixing was done at the home of the rapper *Tormento Vil Dos Mañas*. Two components of the song's final version were recorded in a studio installed in his room: the part of *El Mapu* and the choir was recorded by the ranchera singer *Maura de Los Ríos* and the background vocals were done by her son *Jakase Mc* (see figure 6). The final assembly was done by the stated rapper who was assisted by a local dj, *Dj Dramastralez*, who *scratched* for the final version. The lyrics adopted an accusatory tone towards extractivist projects in *Wadalafken Mapu* and complicit agents who allow it, it included the *mapudungun* language, Spanish language as well as a type of slang associated with marginal and penitentiary environments known as *coa*. Our insertion in this phase and during the entire process was diffuse, which was extremely fruitful. Although we are not experts, we gave recommendations and appreciations, as well as organizing and intervening in different phases of activities.



FIGURE 6: Recording at *Tormento Vil Dos Mañas* home studio. Source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2017.

iii) Assembling

While the song was created, ideas for the audiovisual content were also developed during the workshops. However, there was a special session in the *ruka* for designing the script itself. It was agreed that the main argument for the visual storyline must be centered on their opposition to extractivist practices associated to corporations and the Chilean State. Three main ideas, with their respective locations and actions were established as part of the audiovisual record of the video clip. First was showing the manner in which local actors took responsibility for their future. The chosen location was the interior of the *ruka*, the actions to be recorded were those that took place during the workshops. Second, faced with the negative impacts associated to different extractivist industries, they wanted to show how the rhymes built by the participants guarded the territory. The chosen locations were specific points associated with extractivist projects, either latent, projected or in place and operational (see image 7); where the participants rapped. Third, they were interested in explaining about the work that went into the making of the video clip and especially about the participants' rhymes. The main locations were mostly other *rukas* in the area, as well as other situations and people within the territory that were propitious. The recording was centered on exposing interactions between the participants and local people (see image 8). Two UACH journalism students and Pablo were in charge of filming. The students were also in charge of the final assembling (including the song audio), closely followed by Gabriel and other participants who discussed the progress and proposed modifications. Later, a new participant with audiovisual experience finished the assembly and provided a fourth body of images. The locations of these images were places of scenic beauty and marine environments, some focusing on the scenery and others on marine productive practices. They had been filmed by this person, before the project and were included for aesthetics and to show productive activities that take place in the coastal area of Valdivia.



FIGURE 7: Mono rapping on a take associated with a salmon farming project. Source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2018.



FIGURE 8: Jakase Mc rapping in Los Molinos during filming of video clip. Source: Pablo Rojas Bahamonde, 2018.

iv) Flowing

The resulting video clip, titled “Our Territory” was presented in academic circles as well as social networks. Before being released it was shown at anthropology congresses (in Chile) and sociology (in Uruguay). The video was posted on YouTube on the 8th of December 2018 and on Facebook two days later. To date (April 2020) it has been reproduced 25 thousand times on the social platform, shared over 917 times and has 64 comments. This ‘viralization’ led to new actions and networking: there was an invitation to speak at an academic event organized by and NGO called Social Hip Hop²² in the city of Santiago in January of 2019. It was decided that Gabriel would be the one to present the work (see figure 9). It was there that an encounter with Emiliano Ríos, an Argentinean professor and researcher from the province of Entre Ríos took place. He had seen their work on Facebook and his interest led to the Wadalafken Rap Workshop being included in his doctoral thesis, centered on building a full-length video on Latin-American indigenous rap music²³.

The director of the NGO Social Hip Hop invited Gabriel to join the organization and start a Mapuche branch in southern Chile. The first activity derived from this invitation was the organization of a Hip Hop event in the city of Valdivia called “From the Street to the Territory”. Some of the activities fostered by the gathering were: a discussion group, similar to the one that had taken place in Santiago, the presentation of a novel about Hip Hop and urban Mapuche youth and a rap gig with groups and exponents from throughout Chile²⁴. Income from inscriptions for the event was used to finance legal defense for recovery of the Lof Michillanca territory in Los Molinos.



FIGURE 9: Gabriel Troncoso Michillanca at discussion on “Social Work from Hip Hop”. Source: Camilo Rojas Bahamonde, 2019.

²² This non-profit NGO is based in Santiago and functions with self-financed projects as well as grants from public funds.

²³ For more information: <https://prensaopal.cl/2020/04/19/estreno-conexion-originaria/>

²⁴ See: <http://www.masretorno.cl/2019/04/30/academico-de-la-escuela-de-arqueologia-uach-aporta-con-trabajo-antropologico-a-cultura-del-rap/>

III. Of rappers, ontology and ethnography

The political ontology of Lafkenche rap

We perceive ‘political ontology’ as a theoretic perspective that operationalizes and delves into proposals of the ‘ontological turn’ in asymmetrical power contexts. It may be understood as a ‘medium range’ theory (Merton 1959), centered on inquiring into conflictive situations where actors or collectives who mobilize different ontological assumptions are involved. As a field, it is still under construction, at its main proponents find empirical sustenance in Latin America (Blaser 2009; De la Cadena 2010, 2015), researching situations of conflict derived from extractivist activities. One of its main ideas is the exploration of the “negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology” (Blaser 2009: 11). It is based on one of the main arguments of Science and Technology Studies referring to the generative power of practices. As stated by Mol (1999: 75): “reality does not precede the mundane practices that we interact with, but is formed by these practices”. This has allowed delving into the manner in which specific collectives ‘perform’ certain worlds, with the respective entities and practices that are part of them.

The first element to consider in the case under study is the way in which the environmental conflicts were conceived. Initially the idea was to focus only on an eolic power plant project, but a wider, critical view of the territorial reality was ‘imposed’ in the workshops. A defining moment occurred during the first workshop when Gabriel presented the conflicts within the territory, leading the participant to address them in their entirety, marking the antagonism towards corporations and the State. This is correlated to the experience of the local leaders, one of whom is Gabriel himself, who face a variety of issues that are interrelated. A second element was problematizing indigenous and specifically the Mapuche experience. Rather than seeing it as unmoving, in the manner of essentialist perspectives, stemming from certain academic trends (as ‘ecological native’) or from the State²⁵, the work was constructed and shows a dynamic, urban -in spite of being positioned in a rural setting- and open to alterity way of being Mapuche (see Course 2011; González 2015). Furthermore, their own conditions of possibility demonstrate it: the presence of participants from the Chilean world in all stages, especially illustrative is that of the Chilean rapper Tormento Vil Dos Mañas. Besides being a central figure in building the song, he participates with a stanza of his own, that was, nevertheless, created within the setting of the workshops. The third element is the problematization of the human as a unit for analysis of politics. The work includes nonhuman entities widely consigned to the ethnographic corpus of the Mapuche people, such as the *alwe* [ancestors] and *Ngenechen* [General deity] (see Moulán 2012, Ramírez 2006 and Rojas-Bahamonde 2016 on relevance). This does not imply that all things Mapuche should be relegated to a closed category (as exclusively linked to an animist ontology, for example), but as related to other forms prevalent in modernity. In other words, the relation between human and more-than-human beings did not annulled other linkages, but rather increase the complexity of the ‘composition of worlds’ (Descola 2014).

Based on the latter, before a static and dichotomic being Mapuche, and a mechanical, modern and inert nature, or circumscribing environment, what is configured instead, is a centrifugate *mapuchidad* (Course 2011), constituted in relation to alterity and positioned in a complex territory. This does not imply the omission of the existence of specific actors -incarnated in corporative actions of both the state and companies- conceived as a threat.

Experimenting the flow of ethnography: steps to go beyond the ‘ontological turn’

Pushing the ‘ontological turn’ towards zones that have not necessarily been traversed, implies the imaginative exploration of a central component of anthropology, such as ethnography. This exploration may take the form of a problematization that interrogates ‘the nature and the being’ of itself. Other forms of conceiving it and practicing may emerge during this transit. Specifically through the criticism of a dichotomy that is not especially problematized and the conventional manner of considering results and evidence.

25 According to legislation: Ley Indígena 19.253 of Chile passed in 1993. Specifically, paragraph 2, article 2: <https://www.leychile.cl/Navegar?idNorma=30620&r=1>

The former refers to the researcher/researched dichotomy. A ‘minimum’ definition by an academic authority from the United States may be useful. Sherry Ortner proposes: “Ethnography of course means many things. Minimally, however, it has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self -as much of it as possible- as the instrument of knowing” (2006: 42). The intention of citing this definition is to highlight that, even at its ‘minimum’ it implicates suppositions that narrow other possibilities for conceiving it and practicing it. Specifically, it reproduces the researcher/researched dichotomy.

Ethnographic undertakings -as stated by Kopenawa and Albert (2013: 430-431)- is configured as a “pact”, whose foremost “imperative” of commitment between researcher and subject of research is that the researcher evidently must scrupulously do justice to the “conceptual imagination” of their hosts. This is relevant inasmuch as the destabilization of the researcher/researched dichotomy cannot proceed from an attitude where the relation of power involved in the production of knowledge is obviated or invisibilized. On the contrary, this relation is negotiated and the positions and interests between those involved are made explicit, considering the quality of the investigative process, including the products that are to be created in a relevant manner.

In the course of our work, this involved channeling and catalyzing the motivations and abilities of our local counterparts from the beginning to the very end. It implied –methodologically- ‘taking seriously’ the call to -conceptually- ‘take seriously’ the alterity proposed by the ‘ontological turn’. This call synthesizes the central guidelines of that perspective, especially mentioned by Viveiros de Castro (2011a)²⁶. Its aim is to radicalize the anthropological exercise and the ancestral preoccupation about overcoming ethnocentrism. The main point is that from the early approach the ethnographer must consider, systematically and emphatically, her/his own premises about the reality of the worlds that s/he becomes part of, as well as the search for adequate conceptualizations of them. This means positioning the modern dichotomy between nature and culture as a possibility, among others, of organizing the entities inhabiting the world. The local counterpart references are not circumscribed to (mere) ‘beliefs’ or ‘world views’, but are decisive clues which must be followed from ethnography, becoming the mechanism to undertake the exploration of these possibilities.

Nevertheless, we made this invitation, literally heading towards practices and creativity concordant with alterity. In other words, modifying the ‘nature’ of the ethnographer and ourselves, as ethnographers, to the point that we allow ourselves to be dragged, experimentally and concretely through the world of our counterpart. Our place in all of this became diffuse, however, highly challenging and fruitful. With no previous experience in the world of hip-hop, we became involved in each of the four phases. A crucial point was the commitment that the main product would be the video clip and, therefore building it would begin ‘at the first moment’. Therefore, there is a non-representational dimension, of lived experience, that is never fully included in textual analysis (or audiovisual). Still, its generative/creative/affective power is recognized and carried out in ethnographic praxis.

This became coupled with the absolute protagonism of our creative partners, incarnated in the participants of the video clip at all stages. The passive, secondary and intermittent figure of informant within an investigation was dissolved. What emerged was a figure close to that of ‘epistemic partners’ (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 83): active, highly motivated and had a vast knowledge concerning the construction of the research main product, as well as being committed to its purposes. The problematization of the researcher/researched dichotomy, and replacing positions, may have reached its most illustrative point when Gabriel himself presented the project at the NGO’s academic event. And later becoming part of it, coordinating a group within the framework of said NGO, based in the locality of Los Molinos. It is relevant to mention that there is a recurring trope in ethnography, about the transformation of the researcher, but there are very few cases (and/or attention paid to them when they occur) in which it is “the other”, the epistemic partner, who change, those who- conventionally- are only providers of information.

The second problematization corresponds to the aesthetic conservatism centered on the written monograph for presenting results. Since the classic *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* by Malinowski in 1922, the written monograph has become the fixed paradigmatic product. It has maintained its predominance in spite of critical reformulations suggested in the face of historic world processes occurring in the 1960’s (Hymes 1969; Asad 1973), the emergence of works in conspicuous areas, such

²⁶ See Willerslev (2013: 41-42) and Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 184-194), among others.

as the audiovisual (from the classic *Nanook of the North* in 1922 and the vast works of Jean Rouch), the critical reformulations to textual conventions (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988), the use of a variety of mediums and digital platforms with a strong ethnographic component and the use of a variety of inter and transdisciplinary approaches, among other experiences.

Currently, within the ‘ontological turn’ the predominance of the monograph is sustained. For example, a recent written monograph (Kopenawa and Albert 2015) is read by its main proponents as a work that “rearranges, inverts and renews the anthropological discourse on Amerindian peoples *redefining its methodological conditions and pragmatic enunciations*” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 12. Our cursive and translation). One of the main obstacles is the central statute granted to written evidence by academic financing entities (Rojas-Bahamonde et al. 2015) and, related to this, the manner in which the practitioners *habitus* are ‘molded’ and constitute criteria of authority in the academic field (Bourdieu 1988).

Methodologically speaking ‘taking -alterity- seriously’, in the sense that we mean, pushes the ‘ontological turn’ to explore other ways of undertaking the ethnographical exercise propitiating other theoretic-methodological dialogues. In other words, if each territory has its own particularities and its inhabitants have certain motivations, interests and abilities, the ethnography is never determined *beforehand*, but -literally- until it conforms in/with the encounter of these territories and inhabitants. Consequently, the conversation with perspectives that problematize and may process the possibilities of this ‘encounter’ –interpellating the researcher/researched division and/or the univocality of the created products, especially written evidence- becomes necessary and fruitful. The cartography of options for this conversation is broad and interdisciplinary. Among other: the pedagogic praxis of Freire (1967, 1970) and the action-research of Fals Borda (1979), the reciprocal (Lawless 2000), collaborative (Lassiter 2005, Holmes and Marcus 2008), feminist (Lamas 2018, Schrock 2013), queer (Rooke 2009), experimental (Estalella and Sánchez 2016), engaged (Low and Merry 2010) and militant ethnographies (Scheper-Hugues 1995). Also, the challenging links and interventions established between anthropology and disciplines such as design (Pink et al. 2016) and topics like the future (Salazar et al. 2017).

Based on the territorial particularities and the expertise and objectives of the people we work with, to “take seriously” in our ethnography implied considering other products -beyond the conventional written evidence- of the ethnographic undertaking. The process of building the video clip, besides destabilizing the researcher/researched dichotomy, made the academic emphasis of the results and consequential limited reach of the resulting knowledge more complex. In other words, it allowed transit in and out of academic circles. It is relevant to mention the creation of links and new instances propitiated as the work was presented. This was based on a dynamic and virtuous correspondence on social media (especially Facebook) and the off-line world. The ‘social life’ of the work on social media networks has been remarkable (Rojas-Bahamonde et al. 2015) New possibilities arose, especially after the invitation by the NGO to present the work in Santiago. At that same event the inclusion of the Wadalafquen Mapu Rap workshop in a Latin American video clip was coordinated. Information gathered on social media was also relevant for validation purposes. Comments from other actors within the world of rap became material for evaluating what had been done. An illustrative example is a post by a member of a collective called Wechekeche Ñi Trawun, who are pioneers in cultivating rap in the Mapuche world (see Figure 10).



[Congratulations *pu peñi* [to all brothers]... *pu lamngen* [to all sisters]... great song... *lemorria* [greetings] from the *Pikum Mapu* [Mapuche Lands of the North] from your brothers Wechekeche ñi Trawün...]

FIGURE 10: Screenshot of comment of video clip “Our Territory” on Facebook. Source: Fan Page Taller de Rap. Wadalafken Mapu

This ‘taking seriously’ the actions and creativity of our intermediaries came from a non-representational form of experimenting ethnographic work. Not because there was no audiovisual or written representation (such as, for example, this article), but because the value of experimenting social creativity, through performative and emerging action became more important than the self-imposed need to give a faithful account of a determined reality (Vannini 2015).

IV. Conclusions

The ‘ontological turn’ is currently a perspective of great relevance in anthropology. Its preoccupation with reality, the nature of being and the existence status of the entities that populate the world mark an original approach within the discipline. The endeavor to build theoretic conditions beyond modern dualisms -especially those related to the nature and culture dichotomy- and the preponderance of the ethnography. Nevertheless, aspects that narrow these possibilities are contained within its proposals. One of these is a strong philosophical imprint arising from the preoccupation with conceptualization; another is a certain esthetic conservatism derived from the centrality of the written text -strongly centered on manners of representation- as the paradigmatic product resulting from investigation. In this work there were two underscored planes where this ‘taking seriously’ unfolded. On one hand was the (original) invitation of the ‘ontological turn’, centered on attending the premises of alterity and with ethnographic emphasis on writing and the task of conceptualization. And, on the other, the manner in which we appropriate this invitation, submerging ourselves in the practices and creativity of our counterparts, to the point of coupling the ethnographic exercise to theirs. This exceeds the academic canons; in the resulting products, a rap video clip, as well as in the principle we sustain: the ‘nature’ of ethnography is only defined -at ground level- with people in their territories. Thus, the repertoire of possibilities that ethnography can assume becomes practically infinite.

Following the description of the phases included in its elaboration, from the first contacts to its dissemination, there are two aspects to highlight. On the one hand, attending to the analytical emphasis given by political ontology, we present the worlds that a *lafkenche* rap performs. On the other hand, and with the aim of contributing with steps beyond the ontological turn, the researcher/researched dichotomy was broached and openings were explored when written and strictly representational evidence was denaturalized in the deployment of the ethnographic work. These last two issues are widely problematized and debated within and without anthropology. We affirm that the radicalization of the postulates of the ontological turn, incarnated in ‘taking seriously’ the alterity, leads to rethink ethnography and experimentally following its exceedance, which emerges from the qualities and relations of the territories and their inhabitants.

This work invites further delving into, at least, three areas. First, the establishment of interaction, critiques and synergy that may occur between methodologic-theoretic perspectives that emphasize the engagement and the positioning in contexts of conflict and violence, such as action-research, the pedagogic critiques and various ethnographic collaborations. Secondly, the execution of a cartography of the ways in which the ethnography has been and is being modified (how and by whom) in the South as in the Global North. Lastly, linked to the previous point, is to nurture the field of studies of transdisciplinary inspiration, even while considering the manner in which perspectives, experiences and creativity of people ‘from below’ break in radically.

The rap video clip was possible due to the genuine stating of interests and engagement of researchers and local counterpart. It reveals the originality that the ethnography can generate when radically ‘taking seriously’ the creative practices of people. In this same manner possibilities are opened for them to broaden their view in their undertakings and purpose of territorial safeguarding. We conclude with a question: what *flow*, you as a reader, are able to ethnographically produce in/with the territories and people that inhabit the place you are immersed in?

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