Performing the jumbled city

Casagrande, Olivia

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A minimal cartography for a place of impossible memory: An ephemeral Indian stain on privileged areas of Santiago

Claudio Alvarado Lincopi
Nor will the dead be safe from the enemy,
if the enemy wins.
And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.
(Walter Benjamin)

Places of memory, spaces where collective memory crystallises and takes refuge, are ephemeral and volatile for diasporic peoples. Migration forces a metaphorical permanent renewal of the territorial tie with an abandoned space in material terms and, at the same time, it unseats possible future memories in the newly inhabited areas. Thus, everything is initially metaphorical: a pure representation of a desire gestated as nostalgia for the past and hunger for the future. This is why places of memory for communities that have been displaced as a result of violence are framed by a rocky path that makes everything weak, fragile, perishable. What is a place of memory for a people that migrate to survive? The train station at their destination? The bars frequented by the community in those cities that sheltered them? The areas of marginality where they were discarded? The hyper-exploitative workspaces where they had to sell their labour as final cogs in the production chain? The diasporic experience is difficult to contain, but over the years, time sediments in certain spaces in the place of destination. It is necessary to sharpen our gaze, to observe closely those past and present experiences to mend a memory and to create an affective bond – often painful, but also dignified – to make visible what has been denied.

One of these invisibilities is to be found in privileged areas of Santiago; the ‘high-income cone’ as contemporary urbanism has called it, the territory where the country’s wealth and prestige merge, the areas of the greatest opulence and where Chilean elites live. These are located in the east of the city. The Barrio Oriente is full of nannies and domestic workers, the ones who enable the basic reproduction of life for our elites. Many were and still are Mapuche women, and their stories are completely erased from these urban areas of privilege.

During the MapsUrbe project, we sought precisely to stress that invisibility, circumventing denial through an exercise of minimal commemoration of these biographical trajectories. It was an ephemeral, transitory exercise: the fact is that places of memory are traversed by power relations that are inexhaustible as long as the hierarchies that forged these unequal experiences are still active. As in Benjamin’s words mentioned in the epigraph, the memory of our dead is not yet safe: there are only flashes of unholy enlightenment on a still tenacious colonial structure. This is precisely what we did: to mark in an ephemeral way a place of impossible Mapuche memory, a profane flash of remembrance to survive present urgencies with dignity. However, we are obliged to review the history of Mapuche migration and racialised work before addressing our intervention, in order to understand
the depth of the gesture and then reflect on our affront to oblivion in the attempt to create an impossible place of memory.

**Colonialism, diaspora and racialised labour in Mapuche history**

Mapuche people were subjected to a brutal process of colonisation during the nineteenth century. The nascent Republic of Chile militarily invaded and occupied the territories that the Spanish Empire had been unable to seize for three centuries. Industrialising technology, a new geopolitical context and the narrative of civilisation versus barbarism created the ideal scenario to carry out the colonial interests of Chilean elites (Antileo Baeza et al. 2015). At stake were millions of hectares for ‘the granary of Chile’, a process of colonisation mirrored in Argentina. By the end of the century, 95 per cent of indigenous land was seized and the Mapuche were constrained to living on only 500,000 hectares of the 10 million they previously inhabited. This, of course, ensured the impoverishment of the Mapuche society and is key to understanding our diasporic experiences during the twentieth century. Countless Mapuche families have lived in various urban areas as a result of migration. Currently, 70 per cent of the Mapuche population live in cities, which is no small matter when it comes to processes of identification and cultural reconfigurations. Given its metropolitan status, Santiago has become the city that has received the largest Mapuche population: in this city, stories of violence and dignity have taken place, many of women working in private homes as live-in maids.

Domestic employment in Latin America is rooted in colonial servitude. Since the arrival of the conquistadores, ‘personal service’ has been considered necessary and inevitable, to the point of naturalising it. In other words, it is an old structure of labour, similar to latifundium (large agricultural estate that used peasant or slave labourers) and inquilinaje (indentured tenant farming), fundamental arrangements in the last five centuries of Latin American history (Sánchez and Cruz 2015). Therefore, discussing this particular structure of labour requires addressing the deepest socio-cultural forms of human relations on the continent. Unveiling the spatiality of ‘live-in domestic employment’ is yet another way of entering into the phenomena of segregation and the configuration of frontiers of Latin American spatial sedimentation, as almost a micro-history from a micro-spatiality of stratification (see Chapter 3).

Domestic labour is among the most feminised in our region. In 2005, the International Labour Organisation stated that more than 12 million women and girls were ‘housemaids’ throughout the continent, representing more than 15 per cent of the economically active female population.
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(Pérez 2013). In Chile, research shows that 97 per cent of domestic jobs are currently performed by women (Órdenes 2016). This feminisation is the result of a series of cultural and political structures that go beyond the scope of this chapter, but which, by way of outline, and following in-depth research on the subject, we could characterise as a patriarchal model of life that defines certain bodies – the feminised ones – as those called upon to carry out service, cleaning and care work; in other words, naturalisation of the place of women within the labour structure (Peredo 2003). To make matters more complex, it is impossible to think about the experiences of women as domestic workers without considering the racial dimension. An interesting study in this regard was carried out by Enrique Antileo Baeza, who, by cross-referencing data, argued that around 60 per cent of indigenous residents in the ‘high-income cone’ of Santiago work in domestic service. This is where the long, colonial continuity becomes apparent; transposed into the twentieth century through racialised jobs, it generates a ‘historical configuration of imaginaries and stereotypes around the jobs held by indigenous men and women (Mapuche in this case), which operate through labelling that assigns certain groups to specific places in the social structure and categorises their jobs as jobs for Indians’ (Antileo Baeza 2015: 73). As such, domestic work in Chile, and Latin America, has been feminised and racialised. Indigenous and Afro-descendant women are the ones who have fulfilled this role for centuries in a labour structure sustained by colonial continuities. This is precisely where hundreds and thousands of Mapuche first arriving in the city of Santiago were employed, after being forced to migrate because of the impoverishment resulting from the Chilean colonisation of the mid-nineteenth century.

There are two contradictorily connected readings of these experiences. On the one hand, the Mapuche women’s accounts tell of pain, but also often of affection, when they refer to their relationships with their masters. Most of them were young women, even girls, who on arriving in the metropolis found work, shelter and food in the same space: they worked where they slept, and ate where they worked. They came from the south, from the rural world, and they stayed in a small room at the back of a big house in privileged areas. Their work was relentless and with no fixed working hours, a kind of servitude where sorrow and affection were mixed. On the other hand, despite this condition of servitude, these jobs gave Mapuche women a new place within their family clans. They received a salary and were able to help their parents who still lived in the impoverished fields of the former Mapuche territory. Many underwent a process of radical empowerment. They could build families and support them, depending on no one but their work. Herein lies a process of dignification that is very present in the Mapuche memory of the city and is why in other research we have argued that Mapuche women’s experiences of domestic work can
be read as ‘memories of violence and dignity’ (Antileo Baeza and Alvarado Lincopi, 2018).

Yet, where do these ‘memories of violence and dignity’ reside? What are the places of these memories? Are they possible? Those of us who had mothers or grandmothers who worked as live-in maids only saw them when they came home, tired but happy to be able to bring food to the house. Very rarely did we see them in those spaces of privilege that they inhabited daily. Of course, we knew their stories; through them, we were informed of the personal conflicts of Chilean elites, through their stories we imagined those houses and neighbourhoods. However, it was nothing more than that: representations of an alien space, unjustly alien, because that is where our grandmothers and our mothers spent their lives.¹

Thus, during MapsUrbe, as a small gesture of rage and love, we went and fleetingly marked those spaces that are foreign, but so much our own, in our memories. We walked those streets which many women of our people inhabited during their working lives and we used the garment that marked them as ‘nannies’ to engrave and make visible a denied memory. In short, we ephemerally stained with Mapuche history one of the privileged areas of Santiago.

A MINIMAL MAPPING FOR A DENIED MEMORY

In the Newspaper Archive of the National Library of Chile, we found a magazine published by the Federación de Trabajadoras de Casa Particular (The Federation of Domestic Workers), the Revista Surge. Only the issues dated between 1959 and 1966 had been collected there, but it was still fundamental for the construction of our cartography.

The 1960s were a time of great political turmoil in Chile; trade unions and workers’ organisations multiplied with new members joining every day, as was the case throughout Latin America. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 brought an atmosphere of epochal change that enveloped the whole continent. The Revista Surge, in particular, changed its editorial line over the course of the decade. If it initially wrote mainly of the role of women as carers and central pillars of the family, with a notorious editorial line emanating directly from the church, during the agitated years of the 1960s, the focus of what was published in the magazine turned to labour conflicts and the unionisation of women working in private homes, especially encouraging those employed as ‘live-ins’. Moreover, to make the exponential growth of the union’s strength visible, the Revista Surge began to publish the names

¹ As shown in Chapter 3, children of live-in maids were sometimes allowed to stay with their mothers when they were very small. It was much less common for the entire family to live in the master’s property.
and addresses of the new affiliates in each issue. They were probably trying to make others lose their fear so that they would be encouraged to join the Federation when they read the name of someone they knew. This information proved crucial for us. The names and addresses printed in the magazine were enough to imagine a zoning of domestic employment, and above all, to recognise where Mapuche women were working, at least between 1959 and 1966. To our surprise, almost all the addresses reported were located in the affluent areas of Santiago. Presumably, unionised female employees gave the addresses of their working places, probably because that was also where they lived as live-in maids. Thus, what we did was to look for names that would show their Mapuche origin through their surnames. In Chile, Mapuche surnames are very recognisable and often a source of discrimination, to the point that during the twentieth century, many Mapuche decided to change them. This immediately distorts the recognition mechanism we used. Even so, it is the form mostly used in archival work, given the impossibility of constructing other mechanisms of identity recognition. What is more, it was enough for us; with this information, we were able to make a minimal mapping of Mapuche domestic employment in the area of Providencia, relating the women’s names to particular addresses.

We had before us another possible indigenous territoriality, not the classic one that speaks of the rural world or marginalised urban areas. This was a cartography that located Mapuche lives in the high-income area of the city – as workers, of course. It was a place of memory erased in the materiality of an obstinately homogenous city but also not claimed by the official Mapuche narrative, which is mostly focused on communal rurality.

**The stubbornness of our mark for an impossible place of memory**

We had a map of the trajectories denied in the official memory of the city. We managed to reconstruct a minimal cartographic representation of the lives of dozens of Mapuche women employed in racialised and feminised labour. We also had names and addresses. However, the map itself wasn’t enough; we had to go and mark those places where these memories do not appear, in a small gesture to dignify the walking of our own mothers and grandmothers. It was a minimal exercise in anticolonial reparation.

Our intention was never to sediment meaning in any definitive way. As commented, the permanence of the stratification and the continuity of racialised work make it impossible to generate a conclusive process of remembrance in that space. This is why we refer to our act as ephemeral, aware of its transitory condition given the impossibility of establishing a place for memory in affective and identitarian terms in that area of the city.
Our action was more like a stain, a brief affront out of tenderness, not as revenge but rather as a precarious redemption. That is why at each house of the addresses found in the Revista Sur­ge, we wrote the name of the Mapuche woman who worked there using the white chalk which we used as children at school.

Chalk, as the materiality of our performance, has a transitory condition of its own. We scratched the street with it, but its erasure was to be expected. It was the only possible outcome: it would only endure until rain washed it away or until, with a simple cloth, someone was ready to remove the name from the ground. Thus, the ephemeral condition of our exercise, given the impossibility of sedimenting a place of memory in the zones of privilege, found its material constitution in the use of chalk. We wrote knowing that we would fail, that our lines would be irremediably erased, that their existence would disappear very easily. And yet we did it. The city then became a school blackboard, and our chalk sketches were nothing more than a tender mark on it. Only through photography could we establish a trace of existence, allowing us to state what we did, how we stubbornly managed to precariously intervene the bourgeois homogeneity and claim a place for the ‘oppressed, but not defeated’ in the city of forgetfulness and lasting segregation.

In addition to the names of the Mapuche women marked at the addresses indicated in Revista Sur­ge, we wanted to be obvious. We wanted to unveil. The metaphor had to be irrefutable. To do this, we used the same marking that sealed the bodies of domestic employment: the maid’s apron. The practice of marking is crucial for the reproduction of social hierarchies, for in this way the bodies of domestic servants become evident. Aprons were and are a marking to differentiate and hierarchise, an aesthetic reinforcement to deepen the racialised and feminised aspect of work. Clothing is also political; its uses and meanings are defined by power relations. The bodies of indigenous women wearing those aprons thus projected their undisputed place on the scale of otherness and inequality. Those bodies covered in blue or reddish pastel tones with mostly grid patterns were easily recognisable in the city of privilege when they went shopping, when they walked the dogs, when they fetched the children from school, when they watered the streets and when they swept the gardens. In short, when their bodies used the public spaces, everyone would know who they were, what their role was and why they were there. Perversely, the pigments, phenotypes and bodies of female domestic workers are generally not common in high-income areas in Chile, nor in much of Latin America. Wealth, to a large extent, remains white on the continent, and a brown body in the public space of privilege is strange, even suspicious. Thus, marking the body of domestic employees was ultimately for the residents’ own peace of mind, an exercise for their own security. Furthermore, the work apron also
contradictorily minimised suspicion of Mapuche women: given their visible role as mere servants, they could walk there without arousing any.

That is why we used that same way of marking racialised and feminised labour as a mark of memory. It was an exercise in saturating the meaning of clothing; its radicalisation as a sign to the point of turning its hierarchical proclamation into an anticolonial banner. Inverting the violence of its meaning, without forgetting that violence, we transformed it into something that is sadly ours, from where – with rage and pain – we seek a dignified memory. It was ultimately a cannibalistic, anthropophagic exercise of devouring the colonial aesthetic until we made it our own, passing it through our entrails, and with it, timidly staining that imposed oblivion, to give shape to an ephemeral and impossible place of memory on the streets of Santiago’s barrio alto.