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## Who Owns the Water? The Relation as Unfinished Objectivation in the Mapuche Lived World

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### ABSTRACT

Anthropological approaches to relations have customarily relied on ethnographic accounts of relations empirically observed through fieldwork, overlooking, in general, the ways in which the very notion of relation is locally conceptualised and put into practice. In this article, we provide a general characterisation of how relations are theorised and practiced in indigenous southern Chile. We propose the expression ‘unfinished objectivation’ to refer to an ideal type of relationship in the Mapuche lived world, which corresponds neither to a subject–object dichotomy nor to a totally intersubjective model. Unfinished objectivation presupposes a type of relation in which those entities that are connected are submitted to the force of one another, but only to the unstable and contingent point before which they lose their irreducible autonomy and agency. To explore the model of unfinished objectivation we focus on the human–water relationship, which illustrates the tension between the need for objectivation, as well as recognition of the subjectivity of beings involved in the relationship. Nowhere is this tension clearer than in conflicts over water rights and ownership status, which have arisen from the commodification of water resources in neoliberal Chile.

### KEYWORDS

Relation; ontology; water; commodity; Mapuche

María was a woman of advanced age, known for her joyful attitude and wisdom. She was also known for her somewhat unusual reputed family history. It was often said, especially by her elder neighbours and family members, that María was the daughter of the ‘water animal’ (*el animal del agua*), a non-human being that dwells around water sources. The story was that her mother, while pregnant, went too close to the river that ran nearby their home, without taking the necessary precautions. Some even said that she bathed in the river waters. As a result, the ‘water animal’ invaded her body, interfering with the formation of the child growing in her belly. This, the people said, is why María was born with a congenital leg defect, which to this day hinders her ability to walk and restricts her range of movement. This inherited trait was evidence of the work of the ‘water animal’ in her gestation. The story of María raises several ethnographic questions: What type of being is a water animal? What are the boundaries between water and humans? What experiences can the engagement with water produce? The answers to these questions,

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we believe, can be found if we look closely at some of the principles that manifest the agency of water in the lived Mapuche worlds, in particular, water's capacity to circulate and its potential to actively participate in the constitution of humans. However, the story of Maria is about more than the meaning of water in Mapuche society. This story implicitly introduces a broader question – that of what makes and what could constitute a relation in Mapuche ontology. The main challenge is how to approach this extraordinary relation between Maria and the 'water animal', as it requires an analytical reconceptualisation of the idea of relation itself beyond any pre-determined barrier of otherness, either between subjects or between subject and 'object'. In this regard, and for us, it means rethinking what a relation is and moving into the *excess it presents to us*, which as Marisol de la Cadena has proposed, consists of all that stands beyond the ontological limit of the world that can be comprehended through the self-evident means of culture or knowledge of nature (de la Cadena 2015, 275–276).

Based on various ethnographic accounts gathered over several years in southern Chile, this article shows that relations in the lived world of Mapuche rural residents are neither meeting points between pre-existing entities nor are they simply constitutive forces between previously undetermined agencies. Rather, the relation here is best understood as a contingent singling out of a segment of an immanent continuity to which all entities belong. Relations, we argue, entail a potential removal of entities from immanent continuity, and, consequently, the framing of subjects into objects. In an attempt to identify an overall principle capable of explaining what relations are and do in the lives of our interlocutors, we propose the idea of 'unfinished objectivation', an ideal type of relation in which those entities that are linked are submitted to the force of one another, but only to the unstable and contingent point before which they lose their irreducible uniqueness and agency. We propose the term 'unfinished objectivation' as an analytical, thus irreparably incomplete translation of multiple social, ecological and cosmological relations, centred on the recognition of the multiple constitution of all entities and their intrinsic individuality. Ultimately, the need and danger of objectification inherent to virtually all relations in the Mapuche lived world presents itself as a moral dilemma, a point that will be explored at length in this article through a focus on the ethics of water ownership.

A reflection on the ontological dimension of relations is central to philosophical approaches to the subject–object dichotomy. Under Spinoza's influence, the idea itself of a priori subject–object separation has been questioned through an emphasis on processes of mutual constitution, as it has with the conceptualisation of affect advanced by Deleuze (1990) and that of intra-action proposed by Barad (2007). Our analysis of the ontological principles behind relations in the lived Mapuche world is based on insights from different philosophical attempts to recognise the indivisibility of existing entities and the constituent nature of relations for those entities. However, observation of practices and ideas concerning environmental engagement in rural Mapuche communities suggests that the complete overcoming of the categories of subject and object runs the risk of underestimating the potential existence of other ways of thinking about these categories. Far from wanting to articulate an essentialist theory about the ontological principles that sustain Mapuche relationality, we use the expression 'unfinished objectivation' to describe some general principles abstracted from different relations and practices observed during ethnographic fieldwork. In doing so, we intend to demonstrate the limits of an anthropological heuristic that aims to emphasise the empirical existence of multiple relations

without allowing for the possibility that there are multiple ways of thinking about the relation. As Holbraad and Pedersen put it, rendering the anthropologist's own thoughts subject to the same experimental intervention as our interlocutors' is 'what allows the ethnographic contingencies that emerge from fieldwork to transform perpetually the very concepts that one uses to describe and analyse these ethnographic materials anthropologically' (2017, 12). The idea of 'unfinished objectivation', ultimately, helps us to acknowledge the limits of social analysis in considering the relation as both an interaction between two predefined entities and as the constitutive process of any entity.

The model of unfinished objectivation that we propose is necessarily subject to variations dependent upon the particularities of certain existing entities. For this reason, we focus on a type of relation, the one between humans and water, that clearly problematises any attempt for human objectivation of the non-human, at the same time as it reveals the ineluctable necessity of objectivation. Water is an element of great symbolic and cultural importance in quite possibly all social and historical contexts, representing a regenerative, purifying force, and even the foremost synonym for life (see Strang 2004). The uniqueness of the formal physical qualities of water that produce its incessant transformation and transduction (Strang 2005, 102) explains why this element is often understood as an actor capable of participating in the joining of complex assemblages involving humans and non-humans, more so than any other natural resource (Wagner 2013, 9). Water's transformative characteristics are intimately linked to its political role in the debates on the preservation of natural resources as commons, and recent commodification processes associated with neoliberal environmental governance (see Bakker 2007; Budds 2004). In this article, we will refute the idea that it is possible for human ownership over water without negative repercussions on the vitality of water itself. To support this position, we will first examine the ideal forms of relations in rural Mapuche life. Subsequently, we will review the particular case of water and its double characterisation as a subject and object in the life of Mapuche rural communities. Finally, we will discuss the political implications of the model of unfinished objectivation proposed in this article by analysing two controversies surrounding droughts and infrastructural projects, in which the question of water ownership becomes of vital significance for our interlocutors.

The ethnographic insights presented in this article are drawn from multiple fieldwork experiences in four rural areas across southern Chile, in the surroundings of the towns of Traiguén, Ralco, Contulmo and Pucón. The vast majority of our interlocutors belong to an Indigenous Community (*Comunidad Indígena*), a small territorial unit typically located in rural areas with limited political recognition for the local Mapuche population.<sup>1</sup> The areas where we have carried out fieldwork diverge in ecological and geographical conditions. Some of them are in the coastal region (Contulmo) and residents here have traditionally relied on small agricultural tasks for their livelihood. Others are in the central flat valley (Traiguén), where bigger, market-oriented, agricultural efforts can occur. Still others are in mountainous regions (Ralco, Pucón), where cattle raising seems to traditionally be the only viable option for sustenance. Despite these and other differences, however, all areas share elements typical of contemporary rural areas in Chile. These include: the presence of strong migratory flows to the city associated with land scarcity produced by historical processes of colonial dispossession, low incomes and job shortages; a growing influence of evangelical churches; cultural revitalisation processes that aim to counteract the historical loss of language and cultural practices; strategic alliances mobilised by

local governments to implement development projects; and everyday relations with non-indigenous rural residents, known as *Chilenos*, Chileans, or *winkas*, a term with derogatory undertones referring to non-Mapuche people as usurpers (see Di Giminiiani 2018; González Gálvez 2016).

### The Morality of Relations

Our analysis of the notion of relation in the Mapuche lived world is largely inspired by a critical appraisal of the particular anthropological tradition that sees the relation as a link between two self-contained units (see Radcliffe-Brown 1965). In the last four decades, anthropological literature has attempted to move beyond the distinction between the relation and what is being related, and consequently, the classical question of whether entities form relations or vice versa (Strathern 1988). This critical direction has allowed, among many things, the destabilisation of notions such as part and whole (Strathern 1992), and a renewed attention to entities both in terms of what they are, and how they become what they are (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 113–115). With respect to the constitution of entities, the notion of sympoiesis, recently explored by Haraway, seems particularly illuminating (2016, 59–67).<sup>2</sup> The idea of sympoiesis points out the essentially dynamic and non-self-contained nature of existing entities, or in the Haraway's words, that 'critters – human and not – become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding' (2016, 97). In a similar vein, Barad's notion of intra-action refers to 'the mutual constitution of entangled agencies': [...] 'In contrast to the usual "interaction", which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (2007, 33). In this article we follow a working definition, extrapolated from our own analysis of ethnographic material, of the relation in the Mapuche life as a segment, selected arbitrarily, of an immanent continuity of which all existing entities form part (see Bonelli and González Gálvez 2017). In this sense, the relation is not created or pre-existing (Strathern 1988), but rather demonstrates a certain analytical separation in the intra-action, in Barad's sense, of agencies whose existence is mutually imbricated. In other words, relations are analytic abstractions, intellectual understandings, of broader processes of intra-action or sympoiesis. Bearing in mind this idea of relation, it is possible to claim that the way in which interwoven agencies intra-act has a constitutive impact, not only on the arbitrarily selected segment of the immanent continuity that we call relation, but on the totality of the immanent continuity of being. By the same token, agencies must intra-act in accordance with a moral that allows for the persistence of all beings.

For several authors (see Bonelli 2014; Course 2011; Di Giminiiani 2018; González Gálvez 2016), Mapuche life can be summarised as an ongoing tension between two dimensions of being: one collective and the other singular. With respect to the former, there seems to be a general agreement that all beings, human and non-human, are part of a principle of continuous existence (Bonelli and González Gálvez 2017). This continuous existence manifests through a force immanent in the world, referred to as *newen* by the Mapuche, appearing with different intensity in each being (Course 2012). The singular dimension of being is marked by the interrelation between the principles of respect and

autonomy, which highlight the exceptionality of all beings, as shown by Course (2011). Significant to the present discussion is that these two principles are simultaneously emphasised within Mapuche society, even when they seem to be in direct contradiction. On the one hand, there is a necessarily collective way of being, where the well-being of one entity is essential for the flourishing of all other beings; on the other, all beings must have an existence separate from the rest, without interfering with the existence of each singularity.<sup>3</sup>

In our view, the solution to this apparent paradox lies in treating the collective and the singular dimensions of being not as symmetrical opposites, but as two ways of seeing the same fundamental principle. To think of these two principles as inherently irreconcilable would constitute an equivocation, a notion first introduced by Roy Wagner in *The Invention of Culture* (1981), and later elaborated by Viveiros de Castro as ‘a type of communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and do not know this’ (2004a, 9). In order to recognise the unstable balance between the continuity and autonomy of all beings, and thus avoid the reduction of these two principles to mere opposites, we propose the expression ‘unfinished objectivation’ in describing the notion of relation in Mapuche life. This expression refers to a governing principle for all relations that explains what is generally expected about how relations should be suitably established. Inherent to the expression ‘unfinished objectivation’ is the idea that the relation is understood as a constitutive force of being, which, therefore, possesses inherent transformative potential, but which, at the same time and precisely for this reason, must constrain the connection, so that the entities it connects remain differentiated. In other words, all relations embody the potential for objectivation, here understood as a reduction of the agency or the subjectification of those involved. Human action thus entails a conscious effort to control the obliterating potential of relations, which could otherwise result in the elimination of differentiation of the entities involved in the relation. This principle stands in opposition to ontologies that draw a radical distinction between subject and object, thus finding an interesting affinity in Deleuze’s theory of affect (1990). For Deleuze, affect refers to the ontological reconfiguration of the subject–object distinction, where the terms of any relation are defined by their mutual influence: ‘the distinction between power and act [...] disappears in favour of two equally actual powers, that of acting, and that of suffering action, which vary inversely one to the other, but whose sum is both constant and constantly effective’ (1990, 93). In characterising this kind of part-whole relation, Deleuze resorts to the notion of absorption, which refers to a conjunction of elements that form a coalition that equally preserves the agential impetus of each element (Bennett 2010, 35). While this idea is certainly useful in clarifying the general points of our approach to the Mapuche notions of relations, the scenario portrayed in affect theory corresponds only partially to the analytical principles of the relations observable in the Mapuche lived world.

To better grasp how relations are manifested as unfinished objectivations built around the values of autonomy and respect, it can be helpful to look at one fundamental notion of Mapuche ontology – that of *newen*. Although all beings manifest *newen*, they do so with specific and unique intensities. In Mapuche life, there are beings that typically manifest *newen* in great intensity, such as the *ngen*, traditionally translated as ‘*espíritus dueños*’ in Spanish, or roughly, ‘spirit masters’ or ‘spirit owners’, and others that manifest it in lesser, almost imperceptible intensities, like common rocks (see Grebe 1993). Each

being's capacity to objectivate, in the sense described above, depends on this intensity, as do the potential repercussions of an attempt at its objectivation. Therefore, the distribution of *newen* could be associated with the notion of animism in the way that Kohn defines it, as an awareness of the suprahuman transcendence of action (2013, 93–95). The objectivation of beings with a low intensity of *newen* generally has no consequence and can be completed without a significant modification of the subject that objectivated said entity. On the contrary, the excessive objectivation of beings with a high intensity of *newen*, as we will see in the case of water, can invoke a response by those beings, who attempt to submit the offender to their subjectivity. This not only affects the entities that are in direct relation, but also will have a negative impact on the general distribution of *newen*, which in turn will have an overall influence on all manifestations of being.

As pointed out earlier, beings with greater intensity of *newen* include the *ngen*, or the 'dueños' (literally, 'masters' or 'owners') of different entities, as this term in Mapudungun is usually translated in Spanish. We will maintain this use for the moment, although, as we will see, one of our points is that this translation is deeply equivocated (*sensu* Viveiros de Castro 2004a) in that if the *ngen* is the master or owner, it is only to the extent that we consider 'property' in the terms of an 'unfinished objectivation'. In our research locations, there are two *ngen* named with great frequency: *ngenmawida*, or roughly the 'master/owner' of the hills where there are native forests, and *ngenko*, the 'master/owner' of the rivers, or more specifically, of running waters.<sup>4</sup> Whenever a human is going to come into contact with *ngen* and/or what belongs to them, they should ask for permission. If this is done correctly, respecting the subjectivity of the *ngen*, the distribution of *newen* remains stable. On the contrary, if one fails to make this request, the *ngen* could interpret it as a transgression to its personal autonomy, which would make it act, in turn, against the offender's personal autonomy. It is for this reason that the concept of respect, '*respeto*' in Spanish or '*yewen*' in Mapudungun, is constantly mentioned by our interlocutors as a kind of ideal behaviour that extends to all types of relations, and in particular to relations with the *ngen*, due to their capacity for retaliation (Course 2011, 31). The link between a human and a *ngen*, which may well be constituted as the canon of any relation within Mapuche life, presupposes then a productive space where the autonomy of both must be respected. In fact, it is this mutual respect that allows for the productivity of the encounter, which is related to the strengthening of being of the entities who are in relation, through the maintenance, between them, of a flow of *newen*. When this respect does not exist, and the agency of one being is submitted to that of the other, the exact opposite occurs: instead of strengthening each other in their constitution, the relation restricts each of the beings involved, hindering the forces that should run freely between them.

As seen so far, all beings find their *being* in their connection with others, a principle that in general functions as a condition of existence. To be is to-be-with-others. But simultaneously it is necessary to manage that condition of existence in order to remain an autonomous entity and not fall into dependence or subsumption (González Gálvez 2016, 233–258). As Course (2011) indicates with respect to the constitution of the subject in Mapuche society, it is about establishing relations in order to be a person, but only to the point where one's own singularity does not disappear in the process. The concept of unfinished objectivation allows us to explain a heterogeneous series of interactions between beings that cannot be reduced to an unfettered objectivation scenario, in which the subject's position acquires stability only in relation to another referent

identified as object, nor to a decidedly cosmocentric scenario, as many Amerindian contexts have been described, in which the very possibility of being an object becomes problematic (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 475). The particular Mapuche configuration of a subject–object divide reflects many of the Amerindian animistic principles, where even things can be seen as constitutive of human life processes (Santos-Granero 2009, 3) and interactions do not assume ‘a neutral relation in which an active and exclusively human subject confronts an inert and naturalized object’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004b, 480). However, it is not a type of approach to the other, both human and non-human, based exclusively on subjectivation, a process that seeks to find the agential aspects of the other involved in a relation, without the need to isolate general characteristics, as in objectivation.<sup>5</sup> Let us continue to explore the idea of unfinished objectivation by focusing on the constitutive processes that emerge from the relations between humans, water and other non-human agents.

### Human–Water Relations

In Mapuche rural life, relations between humans and water can be characterised in two main ways. On the one hand, these relations are pragmatic, and therefore comparable to those that non-indigenous rural residents maintain with water. For instance, all residents must gather water daily for domestic and agricultural purposes, a task that is difficult during the summer months, which are increasingly affected by recurrent droughts. Concern over obtaining water is demonstrated through various actions, from political demands of local public officials to construct collective wells, to the constant need to relocate cattle herds to areas of the countryside in proximity to water sources. On the other hand, also appearing in the human–water relation are certain cosmological premises particular to Mapuche thought, articulated through accounts about and experiences with specific water sources. Culturally hybrid and dynamic environmental and social practices in Mapuche rural areas unveil the potentiality for water sources themselves to act. The agential characteristic of water that can be abstracted from such practices reflects certain key principles, in particular, the unpredictability of water’s behaviour and the general reciprocity of human–water relations.

The power of water is analogous to the general principles of *newen* sketched earlier. In particular, its power lies in its fundamental mobility, which allows for the duplication of its different forms and states. Water’s circulatory capacity also depends on external actions, in particular those carried out by humans. Water sources, such as the *reniko* (literally, ‘water of the reni’), a place where bamboo native to southern Chile (*Chusquea culeou*) are concentrated, or the *menoko* (roughly ‘eye of water’), small peat wetlands (Di Giminiani 2018, 131), are considered powerful and potentially dangerous places because they are rich in *newen*. Also, and possibly for the same reason, they are more frequently associated with the presence of *ngen* than other topographical regions, with the *ngenko* being the most recurrent ‘spirit master’. In our regions of study, this particular *ngen* adopts many appearances, including those of a frog or of a black bull skin (*toro kullin*) floating in the water. Although many local residents appear perplexed by stories about these appearances, and even question the very truth of this entity’s existence (see González Gálvez 2015), there is an overall tendency to see in these stories a premonition of future tragedies, generally affecting the witness. Indeed, water sources can be the stage for disturbing experiences also because of their capacity to promote

*perimontun*, a type of vision usually accompanied by premonitory messages about the future (Schindler 2006, 23).

The propensity water has for social action is strongly associated with its circulation, and we can observe substantial differences between the social capabilities of different water sources based on their movement. In particular, running water (*witrunko*) differs from other types of water in that it is a source of well-being, both at the corporal level for humans and at the ecological level (Skewes et al. 2012). This can be seen in contrast to the role of standing water as an indicator of human and environmental discomfort. The aetiology of many diseases is associated with the improper circulation of internal fluids in the body. For instance, imbalances can be caused from ingesting water that is too cold or too hot, as can happen with the consumption of *mate* (an herbal tea popular in several Latin American countries), which must take place inside the house in order to avoid abrupt temperature changes. Consistent with this general cosmological principle of water, places with standing water, such as lagoons, are considered to be of high risk to human health. For example, we witnessed the case of a member of a community who wanted to move to a plot of land in the vicinity of a small lagoon. Months after the move, this person became seriously ill. In the community there was no room for doubt: residents all made reference to the danger posed by being too close to the lagoon. The move could have been possible, but only if an incantation (*llellipun*) had taken place to avoid repercussions from the *ngen* who inhabited this powerful place.

The regenerative capacity of water is directly linked to its visible purifying abilities, as present in different religious practices and rituals in multiple cultural contexts (Strang 2004, 4). Among the Mapuche, the purifying force of running water manifests, for example, in practices related to the healing of diseases, where the *ngenko*, and other powerful beings, can be summoned by *machi* (roughly, 'shaman') (Foerster 1993, 105). Another similar example can be seen in the winter solstice celebration, known as *wetripantu* or *wiñol tripantu*. In its more customary version, this event involved a morning bath in river waters, reflecting the potential of running water to facilitate the regenerative process of the agricultural cycle (Di Giminiani 2018, 153). In addition, water can intervene by purifying objects infected by the actions of witches (*kalku*). On one occasion, a group of Mapuche residents in one community we studied, was confronted with a controversial case of arson likely caused by their neighbours, and a subsequent discussion arose on the best way to neutralise the remains of the fire, which might otherwise continue to contaminate the surroundings through the actions of a *kalku*. It was decided that the debris would be thrown into a river, because of running water's ability to purify ashes. This example shows how negative human intentions, like *nepen*, can circulate between different ontological barriers, and can even be trapped within materials, such as debris from a fire. Running water, on the other hand, has the capacity to intervene in material relations, while its circulatory capacity also gives it the unique potential to neutralise negative human actions.

The aforementioned examples clearly illustrate a fundamental aspect of the power of circulating water: circulation is a process fully inserted in multiple relations unfolding at social, ecological and cosmological levels. Although circulation is an autonomous process that resists human attempts at control, it is not an intrinsic characteristic of water. Rather, it is the result of interactions between existing entities with different capacities to encourage or hinder circulation. Water, for example, can be obtained in

greater quantities through propitiatory rites such as *ngillatun*, the most prominent fertility ritual in Mapuche society. In this rite, the participants ‘sacrifice’ significant resources, food and work, as an act of gratitude and an appeal to the main *ngenechen* deity, in hopes of obtaining bountiful harvests and protection against drought (Course 2011, 151). Thus, water can be partially transformed into an object, remaining subject to the differential capacities of other entities. The ability to direct the circulation of water is for our interlocutors one of the main differentiators of the various terrains. For example, forests characterised by a high concentration of endemic plant species, commonly known as native woods (*bosques nativos*), are considered capable of returning water to the land and increasing its circulation, distinguishing them from other ecological niches. Climatic factors like rain are also strongly linked to the ability of certain places to attract water and allow for its movement. Gabriel, a farmer in his 60s, once explained this relation through his story: ‘Where we lived before, puddles formed when it rained, but later it dried up. The *menoko* would absorb the clouds ... but now it’s dry’. The droughts, then, negatively affect the *menoko* peat wetlands, which are unable to capture atmospheric water. Droughts, in themselves, are unpredictable processes, but their causes are identified in anthropogenic historical processes, such as deforestation and overexploitation of the soil, which, in our fieldwork regions, are generally seen as a consequence of the expansion of forestry and agro-industry.

The socio-ecological relations involving water exemplify some of the general principles behind the model of unfinished objectivation proposed in this article as a way to translate and inevitably distort the ontological principles behind the idea of relation in Mapuche life. Water in circulation is an agent with the full capacity to intervene in relations, but this agency depends on its partial objectivation by other beings that intervene in its circulation. As we will see in the next section, the idea of unfinished objectivation can help us explain the contemporary political context, where rural Mapuche residents are faced with the need to protect their relationships with water in response to economic and political processes of water commodification.

### Politics and Ethics of Water Ownership

As with most natural resources, political debates over water focus on the tension between its function as a common good and its possible objectivation as a commodity (Mansfield 2009). In contrast to the understanding of water as commons, or in other words, as something necessary for human well-being and the ecosystem, the last five decades have seen the rise of the commodity approach, which ‘asserts that private ownership and management of water supply systems (in distinction from water itself) is possible and indeed preferable’ (Bakker 2007, 441). The increasing commodification of water cannot be separated from the rise of neoliberalism, an ideology that emerged in the 1960s as a critique of the Keynesian principles of market regulation and an advocate for *laissez-faire* economic policies (Harvey 2005, 20–21). Under neoliberalism, enclosure and privatisation of natural resources are seen as efficient responses to the irrational overexploitation of resources, or the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (see Heynen and Robbins 2005). Water is one of the most emblematic commodification cases, since due to its inherently uncertain boundaries (Prieto 2016, 29) it has historically necessitated the development of complex governance technologies for demarcating and allocating its economic value (Bakker 2012, 618). Due to

this paradox – that is, the commodification of a resource whose demarcation seems impossible – the privatisation of water has led to widespread political responses from civil society advocating for the recognition of water as commons (see Bakker 2007).

The socio-political context in which Mapuche experiences of engagement with water sources are unfolding cannot be adequately understood without taking into consideration the general historical process of natural resource commodification that has taken place in Chile over the last five decades. The characterisation of water as a commodity is the historical result of neoliberal economic reforms introduced during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990), and designed to promote the growth of primary resources through support measures, such as tax incentives and modernisation subsidies, for large industries (Kurtz 2001). The creation of legal mechanisms that facilitate the acquisition of public goods has also fostered the expansion of the natural resources market. This can be seen in the case of the 1981 Water Code, the main framework for water resource management in Chile and a source of inspiration for the rest of Latin America during the era of neoliberal reforms (see Bauer 1997). This code is based on the redistribution of rights of use over watercourses via applications and economic transactions, with minimal state regulation. For its supporters, the allocation of water rights to private companies leads to greater efficiency in water management, especially in the field of agriculture, with benefits for the rural population in general (Budds 2004, 326). However, the liberalisation of water rights has brought about strong inequalities that mainly affect small farmers, including a large part of the rural Mapuche population. The allegedly race-blind neoliberalisation of the water market, therefore, has historically accelerated existing processes of indigenous dispossession. In our study areas, it is common for the water rights of a river adjacent to an indigenous community to belong to a non-indigenous owner who, in the parlance of the area, has previously ‘registered his/her water’ (*registró su agua*). In general, this does not prevent the Mapuche from using these water sources for small-scale livestock, agricultural and domestic activities. This is because the owners of these rights, in some cases businesspeople who do not reside in the area, have little interest in prohibiting such low impact activities. However, the absence of water rights becomes a source of obvious concern in cases where communities face potential and actual environmental damage from extractive industries. Two ethnographic examples can help us understand the significance of water ownership debates in rural Mapuche areas.

With some exceptions, the landscape of southern Chile is characterised by the ubiquitous presence of timber plantations, mainly composed of fast-growing imported species, such as the *Eucalyptus Globulus*. For the most part, these plantations are operated by transnational corporations that grew in the 1980s thanks to the military government’s economic policies. Transnational timber companies operating in southern Chile are today targets of environmental and indigenous organisations, which accuse them of causing soil depletion, contributing to the precariousness of agricultural work, and occupying historically dispossessed territories (see Klubock 2014). In one of our areas of study, residents point to the presence of large timber plantations as the primary cause of the well-known decrease in the main river’s flow. Also, according to residents, the underground water reserves have been impacted, and it is increasingly difficult to obtain water from wells. There are two explanations for this scenario, consistent with the pragmatic and ontological strategies that we mentioned in the previous section. On the one hand, the decrease in water is understood as a result of its overexploitation and its excessive

appropriation by private companies, but simultaneously, through the way in which the interventions affect the water's circulation and, with it, the continuity of existing beings. As Jorge, a local leader, told us:

the forestry companies came here appropriating everything, levelling everything ... they took out all the native forest to put in their pines, their eucalyptus trees, those trees that guzzle up all the water, and that put an end to many things that were here before, like the *dihueñes*, the *changle* [two types of mushrooms] ... that's why all the spirits went away.

The disappearance of suprahuman beings is a common theme in rural Mapuche areas, since, as we discussed in the case of the *ngen*, these entities are unstable and are responsive to human actions. For example, as described by Bonelli (2017), in one Mapuche area local residents have interpreted the disappearance of a *menoko* peatland as the result of a spirit master, who left the place anticipating, and at the same time causing, a loss of this water source in response to unethical water extraction by locals following the division of collectively held land into private properties. What this case makes clear is that the disappearance of a water source and its corresponding spirit master cannot be avoided simply by introducing formal water use regimes, natural resource management systems and infrastructure projects.

Timber companies, aware of their impact on local water processes, have developed plans to mitigate the ecological impact of their operations, which usually translates into the development of basic community infrastructure (such as community meeting points known as *sedes*), and the creation of salaried forestry jobs for local residents. However, the constant threat of water disappearance cannot be solved by new forms of objectivation, either through economic compensation or infrastructural change, because relations with water cannot be objectivated in fixed models without negative repercussions. A relation with water that minimises the negative impact of human actions must necessarily be guided by ad hoc actions inspired by an ideal of 'respect'. When water is objectivated by timber companies through its conversion into an asset commensurable with systems of monetary compensation and mitigation of environmental damage, this can cause an unpredictable chain effect that can lead to the disappearance of water resources. This prospect denies the possibility for human ownership of water to exist without negative repercussions on the vitality of water itself. This does not mean that there cannot be an exclusive relation between a group of people and certain water sources occupied for practical purposes, but only that it must always be done while maintaining the balance of 'respect' that guides relations in Mapuche life. In the terms we have proposed, there must necessarily be an objectivation, but it must always be unfinished.

Our second example concerns the question of water ownership in relation to the recent growth of the hydroelectric market in Mapuche areas (see Carruthers and Rodriguez 2009). In the last decade, possibly in response to the increasing public opposition to mega projects, there has been a rapid diffusion of small run-of-river plants known as *centrales de paso*, especially in the Andean valleys of southern Chile where rivers with strong currents are common. Rumours about the possible construction of these dams and the consequent concern over the alteration of watercourses are already elements of daily life in many Andean Mapuche communities. In one of our fieldwork areas, the prospective construction of a run-of-river plant was made public thanks to accounts of the presence of outsiders in the region. In some cases, these were subjects who 'looked like tourists' and

who approached the locals as potential land buyers to never appear again. In others, the outsiders were technicians who took measurements of a small river. These appearances raised suspicions to the point that a local leader decided to investigate the river's water rights in the municipality offices. She discovered then that a well-known construction company in the country had acquired a large part of them. Some months later, at the request of the municipality, representatives of this company approached the leadership of the indigenous community and held various consultation meetings, mediated by local government representatives. In these meetings, they clarified that the project was under technical review and they discussed the possibility of financing and implementing a road improvement development plan as well as financial supports for micro-tourism ventures.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of the community members expressed opposition to the project because of the potential negative effects of disrupting the river and, more generally, because it might negatively affect local tourism, particularly related to recreational fishing. This position garnered support from several local politicians who were interested in the growth of sport fishing throughout the municipal territory. Ultimately, the company made the decision to relocate its project to a different area.

The coming and going of the company created mounting tensions between Mapuche and non-indigenous local residents in the area, who have a long history of shared kinship and friendship ties. Among non-indigenous residents in the valley, opinions about the project's impact and the possibility of giving up their water rights in exchange for financial compensation were diverse. Some owned water rights themselves and saw the construction of the dam as an opportunity to profit from them. While most were critical of this economic prospect, they also recognised the right of each individual to dispose of their water rights as they pleased. In contrast, among the Mapuche residents of the lower part of the valley, rights over water are seen as an issue of public concern that should not be decided based on individual interests. This is because, as mentioned above, there is a generalised idea that infrastructural intervention in watercourses can lead to chronic water loss in an environment of already increasing droughts. Rosa, a local leader, explained the reasons for being against this and other projects in the following terms:

There was a drinking water project that they proposed years ago ... in the river in summer you can almost see the stones, and they wanted to take it out by the hill, over there. I was afraid of the river before, because there was so much water ... once it even took down the bridge. I don't know why the water isn't flowing now ... before, there was so much water flowing, and now people say there isn't.

This story summarises a general concern over water loss, which presents an inevitable danger for a relation of continuity between humans and water sources.

The ethnographic cases on water politics presented so far exemplify a well-known global scenario, that of capitalist accumulation and natural resource commodification in neoliberal times. In illustrating some covert reactions to these processes by rural Mapuche residents, we intend not simply to restate a local version of global political economy, but instead to offer a local critical assessment of the dangers of objectivation as carried out in today's politics. Our interlocutors provide us with a cautionary tale about the risks of water's total objectivation, both materially, through infrastructural transformations, and discursively, through changes in the systems of property ownership. Evidently, the concept of property itself is not absent from the daily experiences of many

inhabitants of indigenous communities, and it is not our intention to reinforce an essentialist narrative that places indigenous and Western societies in opposition based on a mere distinction between collective and private ownership. In line with a historical trajectory of inter-ethnic relations, assimilation and political participation in the Chilean public arena, the rural Mapuche population sees in the notion of property a fundamental legal mechanism that allows them to defend their personal and collective rights (see Di Giminiani 2015). Nonetheless, framing water rights within the legal language of property is not merely pragmatic, as it establishes discursively and, eventually materially, a relation of univocal control by a pre-determined subject, the owner, over an object (water) that is seen as unable to respond to human actions. The objectivation of water, inherent to its use as a natural resource with exclusive rights, reflects the general principle of property, a concept that in anthropology essentially means a social relation between human beings, based on exclusive relations between things and people (see Hann 1998; Verdery and Humphrey 2004). As a structural principle of human relations with the world, the idea of property contributes to a general denial of the influence of things and of their ability to act socially. As Esposito (2015, 2) points out, this perspective can be traced back to the division that Roman law articulated between *res* (thing) and *persona* (person), which within the framework of property theory comes to be conceptualised as an agent with unilateral intentions towards passive and inert objects. Thinking of non-humans only as property means underestimating their ability to act and, ultimately, to participate in constitutive processes of the meanings attributed to different entities (Povinelli 2016, 91).

We have seen earlier that the local life processes involving water consist of intersubjective relations evaluated through the supposed absence or presence of 'respect'. Conceptualised in this sense, human intra-action with water would no longer be one of commodification or protecting it as commons. Rather, this relation can be framed as one between human collectives and uncommons, a term that Blaser and de la Cadena (2017) have proposed to describe powerful other-than-human persons, such as forests, animals, rivers and mountains, that generate human feelings of obligation, charged with trepidation about the potential consequences of not fulfilling it, in different indigenous contexts in Latin America (Blaser and de la Cadena 2017, 186). What is at stake in the indigenous political actions toward supposedly natural objects is precisely the maintenance of a dynamic and unstable relation between subjects, and not chronologically fixing a relation between a preserving subject and a preserved object (water for example) in its function of common or commodity. Returning water to a passive instrument of both protective and extractive human actions establishes an ontological transformation, a finalised objectivation in open contrast to the everyday morality based on which the inherently unstable human relation with water, as with other existing entities, must be maintained. Thinking of the Mapuche relationship with water as an unfinished objectivation means recognising that this relation is not guided by a stable ontological principle, but rather unfolds in a context of ordinary ethics, a type of ethics that, as Veena Das reminds us, consists of a 'dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects' (2012, 134). The concerns and controversies that we have presented demonstrate the key position of water in this everyday ethic, as in the collective uses of water resources in the Andean highlands, characterised by a moral economy focused on the redistribution of water among members of local communities (Babidge 2016; Trawick 2001). With the

expression ‘unfinished objectivation’, we want to add that moral dilemmas regarding the ideal use of water are not only directed at other human owners of water, but also at water itself, recognising its autonomous nature. As we have discussed previously, the Mapuche ontology is characterised by a principle of autonomy for all entities, meaning that they are not reducible to the product of a relation, and at the same time by an emphasis on the relation as the principle that gives differentiated agential capacity to each being. Therefore, the virtual possibility of fully objectivating a subject like water is always limited by a moral horizon centred on the recognition of a relationality of the existing entity based on the autonomy of its singular expressions.

## Conclusion

We began this article with María, a Mapuche woman considered by many to be the ‘daughter’ of the ‘water animal’, a ‘filiation’ visible from a malformation in her legs that prevents her from circulating with ease. In addition, María is renowned in her community for having the gift of *lawentuncheve* (roughly, ‘person who heals with herbs’). Moreover, as her daughter Juana confided, María was not just any *lawentuncheve*. She had once had the ‘*machi* gift’ (see Montecino 1999):

before, my mother dreamed that she had to become a *machi*, to help all people ... but she couldn’t, because to be a *machi* you have to travel a lot, walk from one place to another, and she can’t move around well.

Juana did not confide this by chance; rather, she was trying to point out the unpredictability of the effects of not respecting a *ngen*. Ultimately, her mother’s restricted movement, which made it impossible for her to do the good she could have through the fulfilment of her ‘*machi* gift’, was the result of her grandmother’s impertinence in entering the water while pregnant, failing to respect on principle the circulation of the water.

María’s story encapsulates the main idea of this article, that is, the potential implications of turning water into a mere passive object. Although water must be objectivated so that humans can use it – in this case for bathing – this objectivation must always be controlled so that it does not become absolute and so that it always remains unfinished. Thinking of water as an entity that resists objectivation implies acknowledging that, like other non-humans, water is a part of broad agential assemblages, in which agency is not only concentrated in humans (Bennet 2010, 23). Water’s capacity to act, therefore, varies profoundly if it is inserted in a context where the understanding of water as an inert object has taken root, or in one where the needs for objectivation and the moral importance of inter-subjectivity coexist, as for the Mapuche. In this sense, María’s experience and the other supposedly more political experiences presented in this article reveal the limits of liberal modernity, an ideology founded in large part upon the belief in ‘objective knowledge, reason, and science as the only valid modes of knowing’ (Escobar 2010, 9). A key premise of liberal modernity is the categorical distinction between things and people as the starting point for any political agreement between collectivities. The result is the exclusion of all those relations with non-humans that go beyond the limits of a modern politics centred on the denial of non-human agency (de la Cadena 2015, 46). One of the strategies by which alternative forms of relating to non-humans are politically delegitimised is to treat them as cultural rights or beliefs, defined in this way as second-degree interpretations of an objective

reality whose understanding is possible through expert and scientific knowledge (Povinelli 2016, 21). The case of water in Mapuche rural life exemplifies how ontological principles that are difficult to demarcate in the field of natural resource management can be delegitimised as valid principles in the water management and ownership regime, and, thus, transformed into mere cultural rights. Water property regimes, which define this resource as a commodity or commons, function as an injunction to ‘discover and disseminate a single absolute truth about *how things are*’ (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 293). In this article, we have paid attention to different ways that relations with the non-human can exist not in order to offer a definitive answer about how the world works for a group of people, but rather to think about how the world could be once we recognise the limits of modern liberal politics. This emphasis on indeterminacy and potentiality in our approach to relations with the non-human is at the core of the idea of unfinished objectivation, which does not intend to counter a stable model of objectivation with an equally firm model of subjectivation, but rather warns us of the moral and practical limitations of the human will to objectivate the world.

## Notes

1. The Mapuche is the largest indigenous group in Chile with approximately one million and seven hundred thousand individuals as calculated in the 2017 census. The Mapuche population is distributed in both rural and urban contexts as the consequence of historical displacement from homeland territories (Di Giminiani 2018, 43). Interethnic kin relations are common and the native Mapudungung language is spoken only by a minority of individuals, with Spanish as the first language for both the authors and our interlocutors during fieldwork. While the high mobility of the Mapuche population invites caution in using any clear divide between rural and urban areas, in this article, we refer to the rural context or life, as our ethnographic insights are drawn from dialogues and shared experiences with members of *Comunidades Indígenas*. Indigenous Communities correspond partially to *reducciones*, collective land grants where local Mapuche groups were confined in the aftermath of the Chilean military invasion of the Mapuche region at the end of the twentieth century (see Marimán 2006). With the exception of those cases when our interlocutors have expressed their desire to appear with their names, pseudonyms have been applied for names and places to ensure the privacy of our interlocutors. Census data are publicly available at the website of the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, <http://www.censo2017.cl>.
2. We were first introduced to this notion through the work of Bonelli (forthcoming), who uses it to analyze the constitution of people among Mapuche-Pewenche populations.
3. In Mapuche life, in fact, perhaps there is only one matter that morally is more reproachable than submitting to the will of another, and that is precisely to submit another to one’s own will, a matter that is generally recognised as *winka* (González Gálvez 2016, 177–178).
4. For more on the Amerindian phenomenon of spirit masters see Fausto (2008).
5. See the shamanic knowledge case analyzed by Viveiros de Castro (1998).
6. Chile ratified the ILO 169 international convention in 2009. This agreement requires the signatory countries to hold consultation processes with indigenous communities before the implementation of any development project and public policies that affect them (Richards 2013).

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