

Political Topographies

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Clouds, forests, fences, geographers, nation-states, international mediators, animals, settlers, gauchos, historians, and poets leave their trace in the video by Olaf Holzapfel recorded in Patagonia, the far south of Chile and Argentina. These actors seem to draw their paths on Patagonian territory witnessing at the same time the traces of others. Nevertheless, the landscape is not depicted as a static natural backdrop to these agents, their desires and tragedies, but as a situation in formation and under negotiation: unstable, temporary, and affected by the inscription or concealment of any semiotic communication. In his video, Holzapfel shares a series of cinematic observations, encounters, conversations, and collaborations that took place in the continent's south in dialogue with archival material of German geographer Hans Steffen's investigations in the region.

Looking at all of these heterogeneous actors and traces requires sensibility and attentiveness in order to gather and assemble diverse actions and stories. Such looking is a way to perceive the political topography of a border negotiation, using Patagonia as a historical case study. From time to time, the film, as a medium of observation, lets us apprehend the moments when the (post-)colonial pact was signed, or when the terms of a certain kind of experience (that of the Indigenas) ceased to circulate, while in others, zones of collaboration emerge and characters return from the margins.

I.

The Politic of Limits

In 1881 Chile and Argentina signed the *Treaty of Limits*, establishing the division of Patagonia, the continent's southern region—spanning both republics—that had been disputed since the country began to move toward independence from Spain in 1810. By the very logic of the nation-state, the treaty should have been instrumental to secure the national geographical borders, legally separating a western Chilean Patagonia from an eastern Argentinean one. However, negotiations were contentious and lead to an international arbitration and to many years of investigations and debates. Another problematic aspect not covered by the treaty was the colonization of Indigenous communities. The *Treaty of Limits* was a new legal step in the continued colonization under the paradoxical Republic's dictum: How was “liberty, equality, and fraternity” crossed out by the process of colonization?

The “highest summits of the Andes Cordillera which divide the waters...,”¹ which was to represent the first demarcation of the frontier set out by the *Treaty of Limits* and extend up to latitude 52° south, was not easily agreed upon by the governments of Chile and Argentina in the continent's far south. The Andes unfold in multiple and interlaced mountain ranges interspersed by rivers, yet the highest summits of the Andes do not always coincide with the natural boundaries provided by the “waters” referred to in the treaty. It was a striking and problematic border formula in that it described two possible lines that were quite different in nature: the possible borders from latitude 40° south to 52° south. Such differences could not be settled amicably between the two governments and the disputed land was declared subject to international arbitration. In the context of this contentious situation, the Chilean government hired the German geographer Hans Steffen as scientific advisor to join the *Comisión de Límites con la República Argentina* (Commission of Borders with the Argentinean Republic) and to defend the Chilean position regarding a borderline based on the “division of waters,” drawing a line between the sources of streams flowing down to either coast. Between 1892 and 1902, Steffen, who at that time was professor of History and Geography at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago, pursued several hydrographical

studies and geographic explorations into the disputed area. Compiled in four volumes, the resulting report was a quest for the places where the waters divide into opposite directions—creating a view of mirror-like inversion—and it became crucial for the interpretation of the *Treaty of Limits* in 1902 before the London Court of International Arbitration—the international mediator amid both countries—in an effort to define a borderline.

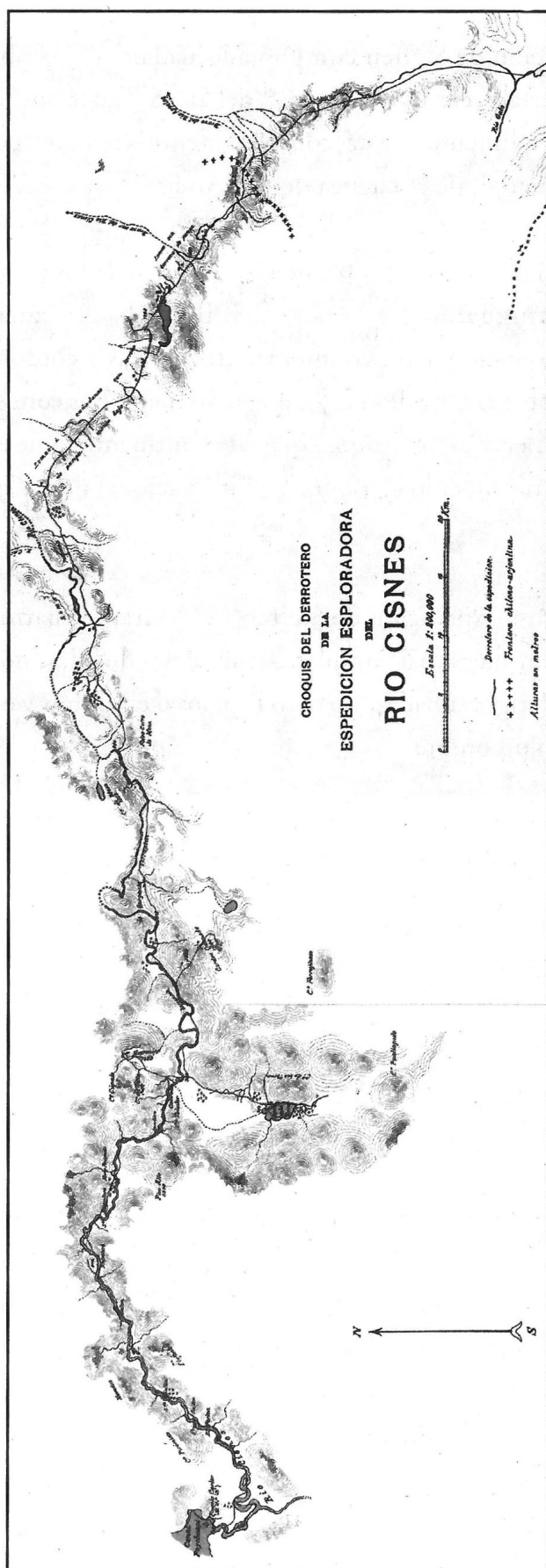
What is more, the controversy regarding the boundary line was not a blind ambition to draw a line across the territory: the politics regarding borders involved observing the spacious landscape as well as the porous “borderline experience” (*Grenzerfahrung*) of Patagonians, taking into consideration settlements and their infrastructure—like ports and roads serving commerce and communication, strategic paths, as well as the geographic characteristics of the land, its structure and configuration. Regarding the latter, Steffen argued that “western Patagonia belongs almost entirely to the great mountain system of the Andes, presenting a surface with an extraordinary variety of vertical configuration, contrasting remarkably with the uniformity of the surface of eastern Patagonia, whose endless plateaus extend with monotonous regularity”. Steffen continued to state that, based on his observations, “another zone is interposed between the two regions by name of Transitory Region.”²

Following this social understanding of the border, Steffen bears witness to both the concrete and symbolic “borderline experience” as a particular practice for coexistence, passage, and negotiation. In the summer of 1894–95, during his exploration of the Palena River, Steffen crossed Bariloche on the Argentinean side and from that point headed south, arriving at the upper banks of one of the Palena’s tributaries, by chance meeting an Argentine commission that was also engaged in the practical work of border-marking at latitude 41° south. Both groups named the site, an area that became the border between Chile and Argentina, *El Encuentro* (The Encounter).³ Perhaps it is no coincidence that Steffen also went by “Juan” (instead of Hans), indicating his experience in the borderline zones.

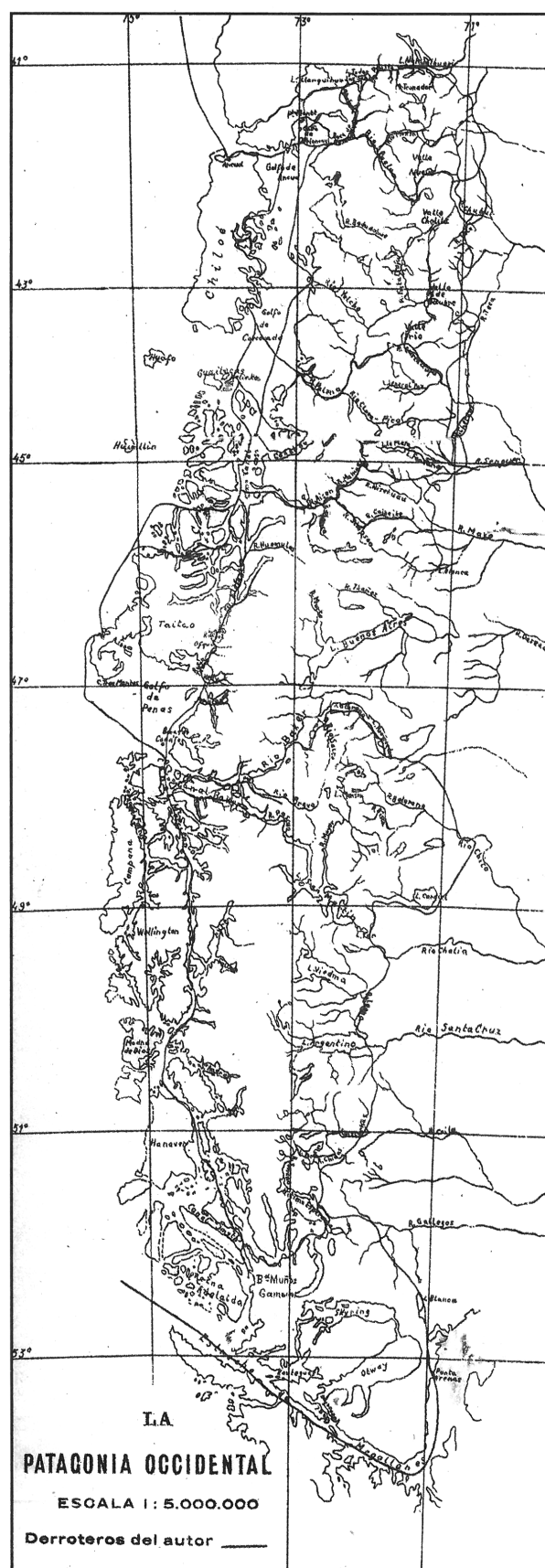
Years later, in 1917, during the First World War and back in Europe, Steffen commented

on the last publication of Sir Thomas H. Holdich, former director of the London Court of International Arbitration, with whom he travelled to Patagonia in 1902 to inspect the disputed areas. Retrospectively, Steffen affirmed how the experience of borders is fundamental to a political position towards peace, as a result of the author’s practical experience. “The first and most important purpose of a state boundary is to secure peace and friendship between neighbouring nations.”⁴

At the time of Steffen’s explorations, starting 1871, the Republic of Chile had established a Ministry of Colonization dedicated to the southern territories; it operated until 1980. Since 1880 Chile had occupied the *Araucania*, the southern Mapuche territory (situated just north of Patagonia). Until 1880 this territory had been the historical frontier region dividing the Mapuche people and the Spanish colonizers and later the representatives of the Republic of Chile. Between 1876 and 1878, the Republic of Argentina undertook the so-called *Desert Conquest* directed against the Indigenous communities occupying the eastern side of Patagonia. The profound fissure—to use a geographical term—in the Republican principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity is evident in the politics of limits and colonization of the south.



Hans Steffen, "Exploración en Río Cisnes" (Exploration in Río Cisnes), sketch, from: *Viajes de Exploración i Estudio en Patagonia Occidental. 1982-1902* (Exploration Travel and Study in Western Patagonia, 1982-1902), vol 2, Imprenta Cervantes, 1909, p. 275.



Hans Steffen, "Patagonia Occidental" (Western Patagonia), map, from: *Viajes de Exploración i Estudio en Patagonia Occidental. 1982-1902* (Exploration Travel and Study in Western Patagonia, 1982-1902), vol 1, Imprenta Cervantes, 1909, p. 39.

II.

Conversations inside the Border Zone

Juan Steffen reported on his fortunate encounters with Indigenous groups in the border zone, who extended their hospitality to him and his crew and provided them with guidance as they crossed the Patagonian mountains and plateaus. In his account about the fifth expedition to the South and the investigations around Fontana Lake (current Argentinean territory) in 1897, Steffen tells of the encounter with a group of Tehuelches and Araucanos under the leadership of the *cacique* Quinchamal. The tribal chief welcomed Steffen and his team in his people's *tolderia*, an encampment of tent-like dwellings built using hides and wooden sticks, which "they usually set up in the summer near the Cordillera, where there is plenty of water and pasture for their animals and a good opportunity to hunt for guanacos."⁵ Their nomadic way of life and the ability to access all of a Patagonia undivided by borders was seen by Steffen as "the freedom of choice" that was "the basic characteristic of life in these remote wastes."⁶ However, when Steffen returned to the place five years later in the summer of 1902 with a British delegation, no trace of the *tolderia* was found, and he wrote:

"I am grateful to the former masters of this country. Without their willingness to help, my Aysén expedition would have not been in great condition in March 1897, and on other journeys; they have been a guide to me and my companions in Patagonia."

It is as much a testimony to Indigenous presence and life—contrary to the myth of the uninhabited and solitary Patagonia—as it is a sign of their displacement. In November 1902 the British King Edward VII made publicly known the verdict of the international tribunal on the Argentina-Chile boundary, establishing the boundary line dividing the contested frontiers. At latitude 46° south, the line was fixed over Lake Buenos Aires (the second largest lake in South America), dividing it into two halves. The border zone as a medium and transmitter, the "transitory region" in Steffen's terms, could be seen to be emblemized by the passage across the lake and its currents in permanent flow, indivisible. However, it bears repeating that the treaty did not contain a single word on the Indigenous situation.

Olaf Holzapfel, in collaboration with Mauricio Quercia (former Director of the Museo Regional de Magallanes), Carlos Klein and Renato Alvarado (film companions), and myself entered into several conversations about the negotiations and configuration of the frontier zone in Patagonia. Through the stories told by the interviewees, it is possible to find access to certain historical moments of the territorial scission, the cultural transformation of the landscape, and the diverse actors involved. Indeed, their roles are not conciliatory; they clash with each other as a matrix of different perspectives without a single vanishing point. Even within a single testimony, it is not uncommon to find contradictions. The following are some of the stories that have shaped the continent's south over the last century, and that, by the by, debunk the idea of Patagonia solely as a place of pristine and virgin nature.

On the southern shore of the lake Buenos Aires (called, in fact, Lake General Carrera in the Chilean part since 1959), is the town of Chile Chico, where historian Danka Ivanoff lives and works. She tells Holzapfel what happened in Patagonia after the hearing at the London Court of International Arbitration in 1902: Indigenous toponyms were forgotten, the new division of the land was established, and companies and settlers arrived.

"The first wave of settlers was facilitated by the Chilean state through concessions of land. Thirteen companies were given large areas of land. As a condition, they were obliged to build roads to the Pacific Ocean and to bring families of Saxon origin."⁸

Different laws create different landscapes. The region's settlers engaged in livestock farming on a grand scale, bringing numerous new actors and operations onto the territory. They introduced the *estancia*, a new operative farming structure that, similar to North American ranches, is composed of residential houses, stables, corrals, and fences around the property.⁹ Sheep, cows, and horses were bought and transported from the Argentinean side. The *estancias'* administrative employees were of Scottish, English, Welsh, Irish, New Zealand, or Australian origin; and the local gauchos—the popularly known skilful horsemen and cattle breeders—enlisted and settled on the *estancias*. Thus, a rather particular new economic, social, and political rural order was imposed on the territory.

This also applied to *Cisnes-Anglo Chilean Pastoral Limited*, an *estancia* that settled in the area of the Cisnes River in 1905, an area that was systematically studied by Juan Steffen, and on which he left detailed reports and precise maps that enabled the possibility of later colonization. During Steffen's expedition along the Cisnes River in the summer of 1898, he named unmapped land formations (these designations are still in use today, like the hill he named *Piramide*) and corrected previous maps of the area. He identified anew the division created by the river; a division that was later accepted by the British arbitration of 1902 and became the borderline between Chile and Argentina. In the course of his expedition, when almost defeated by torrential rain, Steffen was lucky again to encounter a *tolderia* where he received the assistance of Indigenous people, who "...lent us horses to ride the stretch that was missing to get to the 'puesto' or house of Mr. Antonio Steinfeld" and then also "to guide us in the excursion to the upper valley of the Cisnes River."¹⁰ At the same time, Steffen envisioned the productivity of the land for livestock farming. Consequently, the expedition into the border zone also became a catalyst for a transformative vision of how the geographer perceived the land to how the global investor saw it:

"Undoubtedly, the section of the valley that we are traveling through, between the mouth of the Cisnes River and the hill *Piramide*, has all the characteristics of a good pasture that could easily feed about 2,000 head of cattle."¹¹

Today, after having changed administration several times, the *estancia* at the Cisnes River is still active encompassing more than 100,000 hectares of land. The gaucho Juan José Lavoiz tells Holzapfel about his life and work at the *estancia*. Accompanied by his horse, he herds the cattle, and selects the pastures and paths. His outfit is composed of boots, loose-fitting trousers (*bombachas*) belted with a *tirador*, wool sweater, neckerchief, hat, and a knife. For Lavoiz, the lifestyle of the *estancia* is the original tradition, and he recites some popular verses to conclude the conversation: "No me van a ver de traje/ni andar luciendo corbata/de bombacha y alpargata/ese es mi criollo linaje" (They are not going to see me in a suit/or wearing a tie/in a *bombacha* and espadrille/that's my creole lineage.)¹²

The Patagonian gauchos have been "transnational," populating both sides of Patagonia. Historically, the gauchos were

semi-nomadic and independent of any government authority. They emerged during the colonial period in the border regions between Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, across the territories of the Portuguese and Spanish empires and Indigenous groups, and later they moved into southern Argentina and then Chile. The Argentinean *literatura gauchesca* recounts this popular rural way of life, the language and attitude of the gaucho, for example, through the legendary *Martin Fierro* written by José Hernández in 1872.

Despite the power of the *Estancia* to found a new tradition, for Danka Ivanoff these "livestock societies" also carried the potential for conflict with "pioneering settlers," like in the case of the formation of the town of Chile Chico. In 1917, the lands occupied by the settlers since 1905 were at the same time leased to the Swede Carlos von Flack by the Chilean Ministry of Land and Colonization so he could establish a livestock farming society called *Sindicato. The Cordillera Cattle Company*. This situation caused a struggle between the local settlers and the Chilean state that led to the *War of Chile Chico* in 1918.¹³ In the end, the land was retained by the resident settlers and after a few years the town of Chile Chico was founded.

Beyond the conflict between these two different modes of inhabiting the land, new structural elements and actions were introduced to the territory: fires and fences. Large fires besieged the landscape to "open up fields" or to "clean the fields" (as it was called) from the dense Patagonian forests. The fires transformed the landscape in the quest for pastures for livestock farming. Swiss geologist Arnold Heim, who investigated the Patagonian ice fields during his travels in 1939, observed the fires and described this struggle with the land: "... the landscape covered by dead tree trunks gave the impression of a battlefield."¹⁴ Danka Ivanoff refers to "the myth of fires" to point out that it was a legal practice, and the only tool that the Chilean state gave to the settlers. The impenetrable forests have decreased since then.

The characteristic plains of western Patagonia are thus cultural, evidence of the Anthropocene's drastic human intervention into the earth's grown features and processes. When the Salesian missionary, alpinist, and documentalist Alberto Maria de Agostini returned to Patagonia in 1945,

two decades after his previous excursion, he gave account of the radical intervention on the landscape and the transformation of life. Instead of a coexistence of people and life-forms, the originary inhabitants were displaced from the territory, threatened by “civilization”:

“Today, when civilization with all its modern improvements has rapidly invaded the vast Patagonian plains, having populated them with thousands of sheep, having introduced roads, built farms and villages, it is hard to remember that these same plains, a few decades ago, belonged entirely to those famous giant Indigenous [Tehuelches].”¹⁵

Much like the fires, fences also constituted a new colonial sign and performance in the landscape. Over the past years, Olaf Holzapfel and the Chilean artist Sebastian Preece have undertaken a series of research travels into Chilean Patagonia and have engaged in artistic collaborations observing fences, housing typologies, and the landscape to grasp the material history of human colonization, intervention and dwelling. In their films and site-specific works, they interrogate material traces left by the fires and the techniques applied on wood: in the rough wooden planks, they perceive the blow of the axe; in the neat smooth cut, the saw blade of the wood milling industry that began to operate in the region in the 1930s; and in the burnt forest they saw a memorial to the burning fires. Holzapfel and Preece documented, compiled, reconstructed, and recontextualized some of the wooden elements as part of their projects, such as in *Having a Gate*, made and presented in El Blanco or *Housing in Amplitud*, produced and shown in Cerro Castillo, near latitude 46° south during 2014. The latter was later expanded for the MAC Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago, contrasting a precarious wooden materiality of the southern artefacts with the neoclassical monumentality of the MAC.

Those early works unpack and reenact the “code of the fence,” visualizing its political and symbolic boundary-making power. Fences fix, guard, and establish private property, they control the movement of animals, and they also demarcate the border between both parts of Patagonia. Ironically, as most of them are made of local wood, they also embody the rustic and “authentic” countryside.¹⁶ Therefore, here, to “jump the fence” could well have more than one

signification. At his home in the valley of Chile Chico, Mauricio Quercia, architect, former director of the Museo Regional de Magallanes and “half-gauche” (as he introduces himself), talks to Holzapfel about the Patagonian fences as structures of domination and power.

“The fences: the limit is there ... It is the way that the human had to inhabit Patagonia. The Tehuelches did not have fences, but probably they had boundaries. We don’t know ... In modern times, the fence has become something connatural to the whole Patagonian rural landscape and to the livestock farming ... The fences came from Europe with a clear function: to be able to maintain the cattle ranch and sheep farming. It comes to determine position, possession, limit, laws.”¹⁷

Fences have modified the pre-modern order and operations in the area. However, for Quercia, who in some way follows Steffen’s idea regarding natural border zones, fences are above all present in the landscape, where in fact topographical difference determines the identity of the eastern and western parts: “It is the landscape of the border. We are Andean of the bottom of the mountain or we are *estepáricos* [of the steppe] from the plains. This is the border, more than the fence.”

Would it be possible to invert the experience and the notion of the border? Elicura Chihuailaf, poet and medium of his ancestors—the Mapuche (“people of the earth” from Mapungung: *mapu*, “people,” and *che*, “earth”)—received us in his blue house in Quechurewe (Araucanía region), and lead us into a conversation where modern limits and frontiers became unmarked and undone. For Chihuailaf, the mountain range does not divide; it is rather a natural shelter. Historically, he told us, “our ancestors used to walk by the Andes as if they were any hill.” During the conversation, we experienced the release of an epistemic move, and the spaces of translation began to unfold.

III.

A Revolution of Translation

Everyone is aware of the fact that the Mapuche on one side of Patagonia are related to the Mapuches on the other side. The Andes acted as a road instead of a fence. As we can hear in Olaf Holzapfel's video, the poems by Elicura Chihuailaf tell us about the old Andes paths, debunking the assumption that the Cordillera is a border delimiting two separate zones. For those who inhabit it, the Andes open up all their folds.

"This means that the mountain isn't an obstacle for someone living in the pampa or in the valley, they don't prevent us from going to the other side of the Andes via paths that we all know and to reunite with the family that it is on the other side of the Andes ... Not only humans come and go through the Andes, but also animals, like the puma, that still transit through the Andes."¹⁸

Conversations have been the most important medium to learn from nature and to relate to all kinds of beings. In this cosmology, the world is not centred on the human being; therefore, apparently inanimate things, like a stone, a cloud, or a tree, emerge in Chihuailaf's poetry as spiritual entities. There is the concept "itrofilmongen" in Mapudungun, Elicura Chihuailaf tells us, which means "biodiversity" in the sense of "the totality without exclusion; integration of life without fragmentation and the integration of everything living." "It is our duty," expands Chihuailaf, "to get to know the physical space of living beings and of all those who are situated in the same territory." To understand that diversity is valuable, he reminds us to hear the conversations and comprehend their language.

Kura nieye pvllv
Feypikey taiñ pu Che
Fey mew
guyu gekelayay
Ñi Gvtramkangeael feyegvn

(Kura, Sueños de Luna Azul,
2008)

Las piedras tienen espíritu
dice nuestra Gente
por eso
no hay que olvidarse
de Conversar con ellas

(Piedra, Sueños de Luna Azul,
2008)

The art of conversation has also been a political medium to preserve the stories, worldviews, and advice of the ancestors. Chihuailaf has coined the term "Oralitor," a poetic figure who transverses between the Mapuche oral tradition and the colonial

literary one, writing a bilingual poetry, in Mapudungun and Spanish.

In contrast to the nation-state that provides a borderline, one official language (Spanish), and the policy of colonization, bilingual poetry has unfurled a borderless zone of coexistence and translation. In it lies the revolution of the "*poetas traductores*" ("poet-translators").

Those bilingual poems function also as a map comprised of pathways and undisrupted connections. If Holzapfel's film portrays the atmospheric scenes of Patagonia, following the interaction and subtle conversation of various beings, from voluptuous clouds and fenced plains to burnt trees, interrogating (post-)colonial topographies, it might be that he left Juan Steffen's for Elicura Chihuailaf's map:

Tromv egu pekefiñ rupan ta
kakerumen
Antv tripanv:
Wvtre alof kvyen (pukem), karv
pewv kvyen (pwvn)
Wve fvnkun anvuka kvyen
(afchi pewv mu
Ka epe konpachi waalvg mu)
Fillem fvnkun anvuka kvyen
mew (walug)
Ka welu trvfkenvwchi choyvn
kvyen (rimv)

(Kallfv Pewma mew,
*De Sueños Azules y
Contrasueños*, 2008)

Vagando entre riachuelos,
bosques y nubes
Veo pasar las estaciones:
Brotos de Luna fría (invierno),
Luna del verdor (primavera)
Luna de los primeros
frutos (fin de la primavera y
comienzo del verano)
Luna de los frutos abundantes
(verano)
Y Luna de los brotes
cenicientos (otoño)

(*Sueño Azul, De Sueños
Azules y Contrasueños*, 2008)

1. Article 1 of the *Treaty of Limits*, 1881, in: *Reports of the International Arbitral Awards*, United Nations, New York, vol. XXI, 2006.
2. Hans Steffen, *Viaje de Exploración y Estudio en la Patagonia Occidental. 1892–1902* (Exploration Travel and Study in Western Patagonia. 1892–1902), Santiago: Biblioteca Nacional [my translation].
3. Juan Augusto Grosse, “Pequeña Biografía del Dr. Juan Steffen, Profesor de Historia y Geografía de la Universidad de Chile. Explorador de la Patagonia” (Short Biography of Dr. Juan Steffen, Professor of History and Geography of the University of Chile. Explorer of Patagonia), in: *Trapananda*, No. 1, 1978.
4. Hans Steffen, “Ein englisches Buch über politische Grenzen” (An English book on political borders), in: *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, 1917, p. 156.
5. Hans Steffen, *Grenzprobleme und Forschungsreise in Patagonien. Erinnerungsblätter aus der Zeit des chilenisch-argentinischen Grenzkonfliktes*, Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder, 1929, p. 155.
6. Steffen, *Grenzprobleme*, p. 156.
7. Steffen, *Grenzprobleme*, p. 157.
8. Danka Ivanoff interviewed by Olaf Holzapfel in Chile Chico, 2017 [my translation].
9. Mateo Martinic, *De la Trapananda al Aysen: una mirada reflexiva sobre el acontecer e la Región de Aysén desde la prehistoria hasta nuestros días*, Santiago: Pehuén Editores, 2005.
10. Hans Steffen, “Memoria sobre la Expedición Exploradora del Río Cisnes” (Report on the Expedition of the River Cisnes), in: *Viaje de Exploración y Estudio en la Patagonia Occidental. 1892–1902*. (Exploration travel and study in Western Patagonia. 1892–1902), Santiago: Anales de la Universidad de Chile, Vol. I, 1909, pp. 257 and 260.
11. Steffen, *Memoria*, p. 202 [my translation].
12. Juan José Lavoz interviewed by Olaf Holzapfel in Estancia at Cisnes River, 2017 [my translation].
13. Danka Ivanoff, *La Guerra de Chile Chico* (The War of Chile Chico), Chile Chico, self-publication, 1999.
14. Martinic, op. cit. p. 307 [my translation].
15. Alberto Maria de Agostini, *Andes Patagónicos: Viajes de Exploración a la Cordillera Patagónica Austral*. (Patagonian Andes: Exploration Travels to the Southern Patagonian Mountain Range), Buenos Aires: Guillermo Kraft, 1945, p. 377 [my translation].
16. Paz Guevara, “The Territory as a Living Archive,” in: *Housing in Amplitud*, Santiago: Puro Chile, 2014.
17. Mauricio Quercia interviewed by Olaf Holzapfel in Chile Chico, 2017 [my translation].
18. Elicura Chihuailaf interviewed by Olaf Holzapfel and Paz Guevara in Quechurewe (Araucanía region), 2017 [my translation].