

The Mapuche People in Vaca Muerta, Argentina: Between Criminalization and Anti-Extractivist Resistance Aesthetics

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Abstract. In this paper, I contextualize the conflicts that characterize Vaca Muerta in northern Patagonia, Argentina, a geological formation of unconventional hydrocarbon reservoirs that over the past decade has become an area of national and international energy interest. However, social discontent, particularly from the Mapuche communities pre-existing in the area and forming the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén, has led these communities to express their repudiation of the oil companies and the governments in power due to the consequences of fracking: environmental damage, territorial dispossession, the criminalization of the Mapuche people, and the impoverishment of the local society. In this context, I examine the persecution of these communities and the increase in repressive measures under the current government. I also describe and analyse the inter-communitarian resurgence and resistance and how these create new political aesthetics to confront extractivism.

Key Words: Mapuche people, Vaca Muerta, extractivism, criminalization, aesthetics of resistance

Mapuči v Vaca Muerti v Argentini: med kriminalizacijo in estetikom odpora proti ekstraktivizmu

Povzetek. Prispevek kontekstualizira konflikte, ki zaznamujejo Vaca Muerto v severni Patagoniji v Argentini, geološko strukturo, bogato z nekonvencionalnimi nahajališči ogljikovodikov, ki je v zadnjem desetletju postala središče nacionalnega in mednarodnega energetskega interesa. Družbeno nezadovoljstvo, zlasti med mapuškimi skupnostmi, ki na tem območju živijo že od nekdaj in ki tvorijo regionalno koalicijo

Xawvn Ko konfederacije Mapučev iz Neuquén, je privedlo do odklonilnega odnosa do naftnih podjetij in vlade zaradi posledic frackinga: okoljske škode, razlašanja zemlje, kriminalizacije Mapučev in obubožanja lokalnih skupnosti. V tem kontekstu preučujem pregon mapuških skupnosti in porast represivnih ukrepov pod aktualno vlado. Prispevek prav tako analizira ponovno krepitev medskupnostne solidarnosti in odpora ter načine, s katerimi skupnosti ustvarjajo novo politično estetiko za soočanje z ekstraktivizmom.

Ključne besede: Mapuči, Vaca Muerta, ekstraktivizem, kriminalizacija, estetika odpora

Introduction

This paper aims to contextualize the conflict that characterizes Vaca Muerta, a 30,000 square kilometre geological formation that extends over the Argentine provinces of Neuquén, Mendoza, La Pampa, and Río Negro, and contains unconventional shale and gas reservoirs. During the last decade, these resources have turned Vaca Muerta into an area of national and international energy and strategic interest. The unconventional hydrocarbon deposits are in different exploitation processes, whether intensive through fracking (hydraulic fracturing), exploratory, or infrastructure laying; however, the activity has turned Vaca Muerta into a geographic region that has its epicentre in the city of Añelo.

Despite the promises of development of the megaproject, *Editor's note: In decolonial and Indigenous scholarship, megaprojects are seen as tools of colonial-capitalist expansion, reinforcing the dispossession and invisibilization of Indigenous peoples. Resistance to these projects is deeply tied to movements for territorial recovery, autonomy, and ecological justice.* the social discontent of a large population – but in particular of the Mapuche communities that pre-exist in the area and that make up the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko¹ of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén – has led them to express their repudiation of the oil companies and the provincial and national governments in power for the consequences of fracking:

¹ Xawvn Ko is the regional organization of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén. The term comes from Mapuzugun, the language of the Mapuche people, and is written using the Ragleio graphémica system, an orthographic system officially adopted by the Confederation in 1998. In Mapuzugun, Xawvn Ko means 'meeting of the rivers.' In Spanish, it is rendered as Consejo Zonal (Zonal Council). The Xawvn Ko regional coalition comprises 14 Mapuche communities, 5 of which are located in the Vaca Muerta region, a zone of intensive natural resource extraction.

environmental damage, territorial dispossession, criminalization of the Mapuche people, and impoverishment of the local society, among others. In this framework, one of the specific objectives is to problematize the persecution of the communities grouped in the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko and the increase of repression against them in the current governmental context. Likewise, I propose to describe and analyse the Mapuche resurgences and the anti-extractivist resistances that the Mapuche people in this location have been deploying intercommunally and how these provoke and exhibit new political aesthetics to confront extractivism.

In methodological terms, the research that underpins this writing is ethnographic, based on participant observation techniques, in-depth interviews, records of community and inter-community meetings, and analysis of archives of the confederation, legal documentation, and news reports. As a member of a Mapuche community of the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko, it is important to note that my ethnographic work is deeply intertwined with and shaped by daily practices as a Mapuche activist. On the one hand, this gives me access to internal situations and private or otherwise difficult-to-access materials for outsiders; on the other hand, it requires ongoing self-criticism and peer criticism. Although it is not possible to delve into the construction of Indigenous methodologies here, it is important to note that the reflections I present arise from my lived experiences and involvement with the Mapuche communities of Xawvn Ko, as well as from direct participation in their resistance against oil extraction. In this context, despite my deep engagement in the research and active presence in many of the scenes described, the ethnographic choice has been to employ a third-person narrative with an omniscient perspective throughout the text.

Regarding the organization of the article, I first briefly situate the development of Vaca Muerta within the framework of national and provincial energy policies and as part of a larger trajectory of hydrocarbon exploitation in the region, with socioeconomic and environmental consequences manifested by different sectors of the population. Then, I focus on the state response to these manifestations during the last years and on the special criminalization of the Mapuche people, describing the mechanisms of persecution and stigmatization of the communities of Vaca Muerta.

In the third part, I present and describe the general processes of individual and collective Mapuche resurgence in Puelmapu, Argentina, from

a sociohistorical perspective. This exploration aims to understand the political, community, and inter-community organization of the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko communities in Vaca Muerta. I conclude by describing the strategies of resistance against oil extractivism, to analyse the types of actions carried out and the performances executed and exhibited by the Mapuche people, investigating the possibilities of considering them as (new) aesthetics of anti-extractivist resistance.

A Decade of Extractivism Expansion in Vaca Muerta

In 2012, the extraction of non-conventional hydrocarbons became a multi-scale strategic objective of Argentina's hydrocarbon policy. This shift was symbolized by two key events: the expropriation of 51% of Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) (Ley 26.741 2012) and the YPF-Chevron pact in 2013, which introduced fracking in the local oil industry, particularly in Neuquén (Scandizzo 2016; Pérez Roig and Riffo 2022). These developments led to increased state intervention in shaping a new energy matrix, aiming to address the growing internal fuel shortage and rising commodity prices (Svampa 2019).

The introduction of hydraulic fracturing brought novel technological procedures, despite being banned in countries like Ecuador due to environmental concerns. It also attracted national and foreign companies with new capital. The provinces administer subsoil resources, and the Neuquén state manages oil concessions, permits, investment compliance, corporate responsibility practices, and environmental impact control. The province benefits economically through oil royalties, positioning it as Argentina's highest tax-collecting province.

However, Argentina's shift towards a neoliberal economic model has had negative repercussions in the area (Andújar 2005; Beliera 2019; Balazote and Radovich 2000). The privatization of state-owned hydrocarbon companies like YPF (Sabbatella 2014) in the late 1990s led to a socioeconomic crisis and increased unemployment. This resulted from the state's diminished role in the sector, ineffective local redistribution of oil revenues, and capital flight through transnational companies.

Over the past decade, since YPF's renationalization and the development of unconventional exploitation in Vaca Muerta, poverty rates have risen. This trend has been exacerbated by the Javier Milei government's adjustment policies since late 2023, sparking social conflict across various sectors: oil unions, education and health workers, social organizations, and Mapuche communities. These groups primarily express their

dissent through direct actions, including peaceful occupations of government buildings, blockades of oil routes and deposit access points, and work stoppages. These protests, mirrored nationwide due to the country's socioeconomic crisis, have met with government repression. In the Vaca Muerta area, this was exemplified by the June launch of the 'Productive Safety' Programme by the Ministry of Security under Patricia Bullrich. The minister emphasized protecting the mining area and announced the deployment of a Gendarmería Nacional unit in Añelo to ensure companies' legal security for increased productivity and national economic growth.

This programme has drawn criticism from Mapuche communities of the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko and 'Lofche No a la Megaminería' (Cañuqueo and Cabrapan Duarte 2024) of the Parlamento Mapuche Tehuelche de Río Negro. During the Wiñoy Xipantv ceremony, a Mapuche renewal of cycle celebration, the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén issued a statement declaring, 'The Mapuche people are on alert. The recent political decisions by the national government, driven by economic motives to facilitate extractivism in our territories, are deeply concerning,' highlighting the focus on lithium and oil as strategic sectors (cited in Gallo 2024).

Repressive Attack in Xawvn Ko

The current tense relationship between the State and the Mapuche people in Argentina is not recent, but historical, and has foundations that will be addressed later. Nor is the territorial conflict of the communities in the oil context of Vaca Muerta recent, as well as the increasing criminalization of the Mapuche during the last decade, mainly during the government of Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), with Bullrich in charge of the Ministry of National Security.

It should be noted that during this period and under Macri's mandate, the actions of the armed forces led to the deaths of Santiago Maldonado in Pu Lof en Resistencia, in Cushamen, Chubut, and Rafael Nahuel in the Lof Lafquen Winkul Mapu, in Lake Mascardi, Río Negro, in August and November 2017, respectively. Months earlier, in Vaca Muerta, the Minister of Security, the then Chief of Staff Pablo Noceti, and three heads of the Gendarmería Nacional ordered and carried out the illegal entry into the Lof Campo Maripe in June 2017²

² Editor's note: Lof Campo Maripe is one of the most prominent Mapuche communities

This entry of the gendarmerie into the community violated Indigenous rights and the physical and mental integrity of its members due to the oversized and violent operation that, in the words of the federal defender, ‘could’ve turned into a total mess.’ With the solidarity of other social sectors, a criminal complaint was filed the same year by a group of human rights organizations, union organizations, and parties of the City of Neuquén under the charge of ‘Abuse of authority and failure to comply with the duties of a public official’ (248 of the Argentine Criminal Code) against the Minister, the Chief of Staff, the Head of the Agrupación XII Comahue, the Regional Commander, and the General Commander of the Gendarmería Nacional. In 2021, it was the Lof Campo Maripe, through its *logko* (highest authority) and *werken* (spokesperson), which became the plaintiff to promote the case. This process summoned Patricia Bullrich and the rest of the accused to testify despite their request for the statute of limitations on the criminal action, which had strong media resonance.

The illegal actions by these officials took place in the context of members of the Lof Campo Maripe resisting the entry of YPF’s drilling equipment into the Loma Campana field for fracking and maintaining a camp at the site for over a month during the harsh winter to prevent the operation. Lorena, the *werken*, says that when the gendarmerie entered the community’s territory:

The tents were set up – small ones – and the aunt says they were kicking them, two gendarmes at a time. ‘No!’ she thought, ‘they’ll destroy us.’ Aunt Mabel feared they’d hit her. They kicked the truck [a cart adapted as a cabin] that we’d secured from inside with wire. They opened the door, and a gendarme said, ‘Calm down, she’s alone.’ The aunt was in pyjamas. Before this happened, she managed to call the uncle, saying, ‘The gendarmerie is here!’ She could see through the truck’s wooden slats: ‘So many of them – uniforms, trucks, everything. The gendarmerie is here!’³

The *logko* Mabel expressed her belief that the armed forces were ‘practicing what they would later do’ in Cushamen and Mascardi in the months to come. Fortunately, there were fewer people present at the time, especially young people, because, had they been there, the forces would have beaten them, and they would have resisted more. The *werken*, speaking

resisting extractivist operations in Vaca Muerta, especially fracking by YPF in Loma Campana.

³ Interview with Lorena Bravo, *werken* of Lof Campo Maripe, December 2021.

with anguish, remarked, 'we could have been just another name on the list.' This accusation and fear expressed by the Lof authorities is significant, as Laura Kropff Causa (2020) has analysed. It highlights the particular logic by which necropolitics operates, drawing on Mbembe's concept of necropolitics as forms of subjugating life to the power of death. This subjugation is intensified when otherness is defined at the intersection of ethnicity, age, and gender.

In recent years, young Mapuche men have endured most of the state violence in repressive actions during territorial defence efforts. One example is the killing of Elías Garay from the Lof Quemquemtrew in Río Negro. The presence of real estate and forestry industries in these territories has led to what can be described as the re-patriarchalization of these lands, a mechanism of extractivism that has directly contributed to the masculinization of criminalization. Judicial prosecutions and the murders of predominantly young Mapuche men aged 20 to 30, evidence this. *There is concordance with the Latin American general context, as 9 out of 10 defenders killed during 2020 were men* (Global Witness 2021). However, women and children have also faced violence, as seen during the eviction of Lof Lafquen Winkul Mapu at the end of 2022 (Sandá 2022; Molina and García Gualda forthcoming).

The perception of greater repression against young people has influenced resistance strategies in Lof Campo Maripe. Since the start of direct actions to protect the territory and demand its formal recognition as a Mapuche community, it has been the older women who have taken the lead. These women climbed drilling rigs, chaining themselves to the machinery until they received a response from the state. Such decisions arise from community and inter-community agreements, with guidance from the broader Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko, which collectively determines the best strategies. From a feminist perspective, this could be seen as a form of strategic essentialism, where older women take the forefront in making anti-extractivist resistance visible.

However, for a critical analysis of struggles against extractivism, it is important to avoid exclusively feminizing these efforts. Instead, it is essential to understand them within the framework of a broader recognition of the tactics used by Mapuche communities. Both academic and feminist discourses, as well as the contributions of NGOs, have helped amplify awareness and resonance around the defence of Indigenous territories.

Returning to the reason behind the entry of the armed forces into

Campo Maripe, it was the YPF company that reported the ‘impediment to the energy supply,’ as the occupation of the property had disrupted YPF activities involved in extracting, processing, or distributing energy. In 2019, the Minister of Security, through Resolution 768/2019 (‘Ministerio de seguridad: Resolución 768/2019’ 2019), extended the ‘Jurisdiction of the National Gendarmerie to areas determined by the National Director of the National Gendarmerie within the geographical boundaries of the Vaca Muerta geological formation.’ The objective of this measure was to ‘provide physical protection to the facilities of the Hydrocarbon Exploitation Plants’ and to ‘ensure the vital economic interests of the National State.’ Consequently, the representation of the Mapuche in this region was reinforced as both a national and provincial threat, with the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén being one of the organizations with the most conflict with the provincial authorities.

This portrayal did not originate during this period but dates back to earlier territorial claims and the defence of Mapuche communities in the area during the 1990s, in the context of the gas fields’ development associated with the Mega project in the Loma La Lata deposit, which involved conventional resources extraction (Cabrapan Duarte 2022). Newspaper headlines such as ‘Mapuche Communities Launch Offensive Against the Mega Project’ (*Diario Río Negro*, July 21, 1998), ‘Mapuches Refuse to Abandon MEGA’ (*Diario Río Negro*, August 23, 1998), and ‘Mapuches Attack Repsol-YPF Headquarters’ (*Diario Río Negro*, May 3, 2001) framed the presence of these communities negatively, portraying them as obstructers of development and violent actors, rather than highlighting the unconsulted installation of these projects in their ancestral territories.

In the current context, headlines such as ‘Mapuches Halt New Investment from Shell and YPF’ (*Diario Río Negro*, June 28, 2017), ‘YPF Denounces: Mapuche Conflict Halts Multi-million Dollar Investment’ (*Clarín*, May 27, 2018), and ‘The Mapuches Insist on Conditioning the Construction of the Néstor Kirchner Gas Pipeline and Could Affect Investments’ (*Infobae*, 2 August, 2022) illustrate the continuity of this decades-long narrative, albeit updated in light of new investments, technologies, and a shifting political landscape characterized by explicit repressive policies.

Indeed, local and national media constantly emphasize the negative impact that Mapuche communities have on the productivity of the hydrocarbon industry, frequently portraying them as adversaries of extrac-

tive energy projects in Vaca Muerta. Furthermore, narratives such as, ‘They claim territorial rights, but in reality, they seek economic gains; they want to finance Mapuche communities with money from the gas pipeline’ (Poppe 2022) reinforce the impression that these communities are motivated solely by economic interests in the resources located beneath the land they inhabit.

While this framing underscores a public and direct conflict between Mapuche communities and companies,⁴ along with the State’s persecution of the former, it is critical to highlight that, in the legal sphere, the criminalization of the Mapuche is largely driven by private landowners. These individuals hold legal titles to lands traditionally occupied by communities, recognized by private property laws, often with multiple owners per community territory. Many of these titles were acquired in the 1970s, particularly in this region. These private owners are also recognized by the provincial government and oil companies as *surface owners* of the lands where resources will be extracted, entitling them to compensation from the concessionaires under Provincial Law 2183, passed in 1996.

In 2021, a group of individuals, signing themselves as a ‘group of owners and businessmen from Añelo,’ submitted a petition to the governor of Neuquén, claiming that the Mapuche ‘are sprouting like mushrooms just below the new oil wells’ and denouncing ‘the farce of being ancestral communities with the Vaca Muerta boom.’ This contributed to the negative portrayal of the Mapuche communities. Through this petition, as well as similar mechanisms, these individuals also raised administrative objections to the communities’ ongoing legal procedures, such as the registration of legal status, which is a requirement for state recognition as an Indigenous community. In these objections, they questioned the communities’ Indigenous authenticity, effectively delegitimizing their territorial rights as a Mapuche community, which are regulated internationally by the ILO Convention 169 and enshrined in the National Constitution following the 1994 reform, as well as the 2006 reform of the Neuquén provincial constitution.

This reveals the influence that powerful groups exert over the regulation and enforcement of Indigenous rights, alongside the individualized

⁴ An example of this situation occurred in May 2024 when two female authorities from the Newen Kura community – also part of the Regional Coalition Xawyn Ko – were arbitrarily detained for opposing a YPF project’s advancement. This incident drew repudiation at both local and international levels (International Rights of Nature Tribunal 2024).

persecution through which members of Xawvn Ko communities are harassed under criminal charges of usurpation. As Melissa Moreano Venegas, Karolien Van Teijlingen, and Sofía Zaragocin (2019, 18) note, this ‘is one of the outcomes of criminalization and violence, aimed at isolating and targeting key figures in social organizations and movements,’ using legal mechanisms employed by private landowners that impact the security and subjectivity of the communities and their members.

Criminalization has partially achieved its goals: the non-recognition of Mapuche communities as such, preventing territorial surveys⁵ delegitimizing their identity and organizational processes as Lof (a Mapuche territorial and familial community unit)⁶ and stigmatizing the Mapuche people in Vaca Muerta. However, from a strictly legal standpoint, most cases brought against community members in this region by private landowners have not resulted in criminal convictions, with the exception of the trial faced by the Lof Campo Maripe over two years.

In 2019, this trial culminated in the acquittal of six community members. As Sabrina Aguirre (2021) notes, this trial highlighted not only the questioning of Indigenous territorial rights but also the Mapuche authenticity of the defendants. The accuser stated: ‘I know the Campo family, not a community’ (witness 6, hearing of April 14, 2019, cited in Aguirre 2021, 61). This tactic, often employed by public officials, seeks to cast doubt on ethnic origin, as when the mayor of Añelo denied the existence of communities in the area, except for the Paynemil community. In response, the Mapuche staged a peaceful occupation of the mayor’s office to protest his public statements, in the context of the pandemic in August 2021. During this direct action, they demanded the mayor issue a public apology, with elder women telling him:

They don’t have to recognize us, we are natives of the territory. We must recognize those who came from outside! We are Argentine citizens, but we are the Mapuche nation. My parents did not know their rights, that is why they did not form a community. [They were

⁵ The territorial survey in Neuquén province, mandated by National Law No. 26.160 of 2006 (Ley 26.160 2006), was conducted from 2013 to 2015. It covered 18 Mapuche communities out of the existing 70. By 2022, various Indigenous Peoples across Argentina demanded a fourth extension of the law. Its term was expiring once again, with more than half of the communities still unsurveyed. This law’s importance lies in its power to prevent evictions.

⁶ Editor’s note: *Lof* is not a generic word; it refers to a distinct socio-political and territorial organization in Mapuche society.

afraid, they were afraid of being discriminated against, added Josefa Campo.] I am Mapuche, and I declare myself a community when I want, not when you feel like it, the government has to register us. 'Ah, they were family.' Yes, we were family, but when we knew our rights we called ourselves the Mapuche community, because we are Mapuche.⁷

Dispossession, Resurgence and New Aesthetics of Resistance

When Patagonia was incorporated into the Argentine territory and nation-state (Delrio 2005), a racialization process promoted by a historically justified state project, politically and scientifically, which defined Indigenous Peoples as wild, enemies, foreigners, or extinct, was developed (Lazzari and Lenton 2000). It was through military campaigns – and press coverage – that the Argentine State created an 'internal other,' perpetrated violence against it, and justified their actions, while at the same time silencing, a process that today the Mapuche people and the academy undeniably call and refute as 'genocide' (Pérez 2016; Delrio et al. 2018).

On both sides of the Wajmapu (the ancestral Mapuche territory), the systematic projects of the 'Pacification of Araucanía' (1861–1883) in Chile and the 'Conquest of the Desert' (1878–1885) in Argentina oppressed Mapuche society through physical and symbolic violence. These processes not only structured the formation of these states, but also deeply reconfigured relationships within and with the Mapuche society in social, cultural, economic, territorial and intersectional terms. In Patagonia Norte, the consequences, as well as the causes, of this genocide included the concentration of the land in the hands of 'ideal citizens' (landowners, military, foreign investors), together with the death and displacement of those who were considered a threat. These displacements took the form of violent evictions, raids, economic pressure and forced servitude (Cañuqueo et al. 2019), which led to the deterritorialization and the subsequent reterritorialization of the Mapuche people.

Through reterritorialization, the families and communities that had dispersed and relocated at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, either fleeing independently or through agreements with the military to collaborate during the campaigns, rebuilt and redefined their new places of origin. The stories of populations displaced to terri-

⁷ Speech in direct action at the Añelo mayor's office, Celinda Campo and Josefa Campo, August 19, 2021.

tories where they could begin again are representative of the experience of the majority. The escape routes, predominantly running east to west, led to the Andes mountain range or to cross-air areas that served as temporary shelters during genocidal campaigns. The new settlements were often established in regions then considered unproductive for agriculture or cattle grazing. However, a change in the economic utility of the Patagonia desert occurred later, after the discovery of hydrocarbons (Cabrapan Duarte and Stefanelli 2022).

The 1990s in Latin America witnessed an increase in the mobilization of Indigenous Peoples, which coincided with the emergence of broader social movements (independence movements, peasants, environmentalists, afro-descendants and feminist organizations) and the affirmation of Indigenous identity as native peoples in Argentina. This period was also marked by significant advances in international Indigenous rights, such as the adoption of the Convention 169 of the ILO in 1989, which Argentina incorporated into its national legislation in 1992 (Ley 24.071 1992), ratifying it in 2000. This was followed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007. These frameworks, together with the reform of the Argentine Constitution of 1994, had a deep impact on northern Patagonia and catalysed numerous actions of the Mapuche people to claim and protect their territories (Alwyn 2004).

These times fostered processes of territorial and community protection and recovery in Puelmapu (Mapuche territory in Argentina) in the form of *lof* (communities); they also mobilized different Mapuche organizations with different expressions and forms of action. In the case of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén, although it was created in 1970, it was between the '80s and '90s that an autonomous process began, since the original organization involved the provincial State, in particular the Movimiento Popular Neuquino party, and the Catholic Church, which had strongly promoted the formation of the Confederation (Lenton 2010).

The reterritorialization experienced by Mapuche people and families who survived the genocide encompasses complex processes of non-belonging, often coupled with significant organizational efforts. These experiences frequently involve trajectories of territorial and intergenerational mobility – some of which have been more or less forced (Kropff Causa et al. forthcoming). Such individuals or groups, whether they identify as Mapuche or not, may be undergoing – or have undergone – processes of Mapuche resurgence (Cabrapan Duarte 2025).

Within this context of diaspora and forced displacement – marked by silencing and disidentification – the erasure or concealment of Mapuche identity occurred, though never entirely. This erasure functioned simultaneously as a strategy of escape and as a consequence of the brutal colonial and state-led genocidal apparatus. The physical and material dismemberment of families, territories, and bodies, along with the symbolic fragmentation of surviving bodies, constitutes an inescapable historical foundation for contemporary Mapuche resurgence. It offers a painful explanation for the experience of inhabiting a body rendered uncomfortable and confusing, externally marked and defined by racialization and systemic racism.

The Notion of Resurgence

I return to the notion of resurgence, which, for Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) of the Nishnaabeg Nation, in addition to being forms of resistance to colonial domination and expressions of self-determination of the peoples, comprises subjective, individual-collective, everyday practices with diverse expressions. In this sense, the resurgence of the Mapuche community, which also includes individual or personal revivals, involves the knowledge, recovery, and display of various diacritics that, in our case, were previously absent from the recognition and visibility repertoires of families settled since the late nineteenth century along the banks of the Neuquén, Colorado, and Limay rivers.

These diacritics, which, following Claudia Briones and Alejandra Sifredi (1989), can be understood as representations of ethnicity, are varied and are mobilized by communities in specific contexts, whether during direct actions or within spaces convened for organizational, political, or ceremonial purposes. They also involve training spaces and the transmission of knowledge to act or execute the diacritics of identity. As the authors maintain, emphasizing the situational dimension of ethnicity, this is the instance where actions channel ethnicity through cognitive and interactive forms that put it into play. Likewise, there is variability between these actions depending on the social group in question, which responds to the procedural and structural dimensions that affect the margins of manoeuvre to carry out these actions. In recovering these analytical contributions to observe the actions of the communities of the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko in Vaca Muerta, it is necessary to distinguish between actions of territorial defence and resistance, which demand direct actions (for example, roadblocks, access to oil fields, pres-

ence in multi-sector marches or demonstrations and peaceful occupations) and actions that themselves update Mapuche protocols – which contain specific knowledge and forms – such as *xawvn* (assembly meetings) or *gejupun* (ceremonial spaces).

Regarding the first situation, although the main action is to congregate in a specific space and show collective presence and resistance, in the direct actions that bring together the communities, different symbols emerge with different representations. Among these expressions is the *wenufoye*, the representative flag of the Mapuche people in both Argentina and Chile (Ancan 2017), which is displayed at roadblocks or hung on the buildings of oil companies. Another is the use of traditional Mapuche clothing by both women and men, a practice increasingly embraced and encouraged – particularly by communities with a longer history of cultural continuity, compared to those undergoing more recent processes of resurgence. Meetings have taken place mainly between women, where work is done and discussed about the meanings of clothing, and its historical and contemporary use, and the pattern of the *kypam* garment (Mapuche clothing) is also made or shared, for adult women and girls. The effects of these instances of sharing cultural knowledge are then seen in the various collective spaces, reflecting processes of reaffirmation of both personal and collective identity.

Likewise, the incorporation of musical instruments (*kulxug*, *pvfvjka*, *ñorkin*, *xuxuka*) as ways of expression, as well as during recreation and learning spaces generated by adults, predominantly by women, for children, also functions as diacritics. Their sound provides an aesthetic characteristic of Mapuche art that reconnects those present with the generations that precede them, and that music seems to bring back. This movement can be considered as part of the construction of Mapuche memories, where oral narration is not necessarily explicit, although it can occur, enabling a place of sensitivity, even in a context of tension and danger of repression, as it is a measure of direct action. These diacritics also show that spaces of resistance are formative spaces, not only in terms of what territorial defence implies but also in terms of the transmission of knowledge that occurs spontaneously and that provides moments of celebration and enjoyment despite the situation.

Certain social and cultural Mapuche contexts require the implementation of more rigorous protocols, particularly in ceremonial, spiritual, and political spaces. These include smaller *gvbamtuwvn* (parliaments) or *xawvn* (meetings) where community authorities convene.

Ceremonial Spaces

This discussion will focus on ceremonial spaces, as they exemplify the preservation and transmission of intergenerational knowledge through specific formats and practices. These ceremonies can be viewed as performances in the anthropological sense. They serve as crucial acts of cultural transfer, conveying social knowledge, collective memory, and a sense of identity through repeated, structured actions (Taylor and Fuentes 2011, 20). These performances adhere to predetermined behaviours governed by established rules and norms.

Previous anthropological studies, though limited, have examined Mapuche ceremonial representations in this oil industry region. Notably, the thesis of Karine Lopes Narahara (2018) interprets these ceremonies as cosmopolitical practices – interactions between humans and non-humans for territorial defence. Their research compares celebrations of the Cofederación Mapuche de Neuquén in the provincial capital, such as the Wiñoy Xipantv, with the gejpun ceremony at Lanín Volcano in the Andes Mountains.

Of particular interest is the Wiñoy Xipantv ceremony, specifically its inaugural performance in Vaca Muerta, within the Lof Fvta Xayen community, marking the 2024 winter solstice. This event held significant cultural and spiritual importance, while also carrying political weight due to its location in a contested territory and an area of non-conventional oil exploitation. The Confederation's invitation for this event stated:

‘Great cultural mobilization of the Mapuche Nation to celebrate the restart of life, Wiñoy Xipantv’

The call for the intercultural celebration of the national Mapuche day within the framework of Wiñoy Xipantv will be to what is today called Vaca Muerta. It moves from the scenario of recent years that was the Neuquén Plateau in the territory of the Lof Newen Mapu to the Vaca Muerta area. The reason is the enormous concern about the growing contamination caused by the advancement of fracking.

We call on pu wenvy [friends], supportive and committed companions in the defence of nature and life, to share a day of homage to our Mapu, a day of celebration and festivity where the wajmapu offers us the rebirth of all lives, biodiversity or Ixofijmogen.

We look forward to seeing you this Sunday, June 23, at 9 am at the Tratayen Site.

To provide context for the location and the community where the celebration took place, the Lof Fvta Xayen traces its origins to the 'Paynemil Reserve,' established through occupation permits managed since the late nineteenth century by José Paynemil. The 'Paynemil Tribe,' originally from Azul, in the southern region of what is now Buenos Aires province, relocated to the Tratayén and Añelo areas, establishing their communal life along the southern banks of the Neuquén River. With the growth of the family and territorial expansion, one of José Paynemil's daughters, Damiana Paynemil, moved in the mid-1940s to the northern bank of the Neuquén River, towards Tratayén Norte, where she settled with her husband and first children at Puesto Los Algarrobos. Damiana had five children, who, in turn, raised their families in the area, creating various *puestos* (homesteads with animal pens and orchards) along the riverbanks and extending toward the *barda*, the elevated terrain. Today, the community consists of the descendants of these families and is primarily driven by the younger generations, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Damiana Paynemil.

The Lof Fvta Xayen formally established itself as a community in 2015, joining the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén to engage in inter-community territorial defence against growing threats of dispossession. From that point forward, the community sought legal recognition, based on its historical occupation of the land as well as the reaffirmation of its identity, family origins, and ancestral Mapuche territory. In this process of identity affirmation and Mapuche resurgence, the inter-community decision to host the Wiñoy Xi-pantv, both as an internal and intercultural celebration open to broader society, led the Lof to prepare as the host of this important event.

Preparation for the event involved welcoming approximately 400 attendees and working for months in advance to set up the ceremonial space, known as the *rewe*.⁸ This included constructing the *ramada*, a semicircular structure where different communities prepare food and take shelter during and after the ceremony, which in this case lasts the entire day. The preparations also entailed gathering the necessary elements for the *rewe*, such as the *iwe* and *metawe*, traditional ceramic utensils made by the Lof with the guidance of a *kimelfe* (master artisan), and

⁸ Editor's note: A ceremonial and territorial unit – the smallest spiritual-political division in Mapuche society, often formed by several Lof (Mapuche communities) that share a sacred site.



Figure 1 Wiñoy Xipantv Celebrate in Lof Fvta Xayen, 23 June 2024
(photo by Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén, <https://www.facebook.com/share/19HUy7HRJq/>)

‘dressing’ the rewe with everything it requires: *lawen* (medicinal plants), seeds, *ko manzana* and *musay* (apple, wheat, and pine nut drinks), as well as blue, yellow, green, and black flags resembling the wenufoye, *choyke* (ostrich) feathers for the *choyke purun* dance, and traditional Mapuche instruments.

The ceremony also featured the *awvn*, a moment in which riders, mostly men, circle the ramada in a clockwise direction, demonstrating their everyday horsemanship skills. This moment is deeply significant, as the earth seems to pulsate with the thunder of galloping hooves, and the dust kicked up by the horses, combined with the rhythmic sounds of the *kulxug* played by the women, creates an atmosphere of profound spiritual connection.

It was the first time that such a large-scale ceremony was held in the area, and the first time a rewe was raised in the community. This deeply moved the members of Lof Fvta Xayen, both the elders and the youth, as it marked a significant step in their reaffirmation as a Mapuche community. The community authorities welcomed the participants, sharing with them the family’s history, the significance of the land, and their journey toward becoming a unified community fighting for their rights. During this moment, they remembered Grandmother Inocencia, the daughter of Damiana Paynemil, who had recently passed away. She had been an inspiring figure, a crucial example of determination in the fight to protect

their land and territory against private landowners and oil companies that had been encroaching on the area since the 1960s.

Did Damiana Paynemil's father, the logko of the reserve in the early 20th century, ever imagine that his descendants would one day raise a rewe on the other side of the river? Could Damiana have foreseen that the territory where she built her life with her husband and children would, decades later, be coveted by the oil industry and fractured by extraction techniques? Did the children and grandchildren – who are now central figures in the defence of Lof Fvta Xayen – ever imagine in their youth that their future would be communal?

Today, the Wiñoy Xipantv is celebrated in the shadow of the looming oil infrastructure, a joyful event for the communities of the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko. They gather together and welcome members of the non-Mapuche society who have travelled over 80 kilometres, venturing deep into the territory to participate in this celebration. [Field notes, June 2024]

In a complex political context for the Mapuche people, marked by tensions with the national government due to its explicitly anti-Mapuche stance since the presidential campaign of the La Libertad Avanza party, there was uncertainty surrounding the holding of the Wiñoy Xipantv in a territory under conflict. Specifically, concerns were raised about whether the event might provoke reactions that could disrupt its course. However, the ceremony proceeded without interruptions or police inspections and even garnered media attention. Reports highlighted the collective statement signed by Mapuche organizations from Río Negro and Mendoza, which was read by the werken (spokesperson) of Lof Campo Maripe during the afternoon. The statement expressed concern over comments made by Security Minister Patricia Bullrich regarding the formation of the Productive Safety Unit for strategic national areas, including Vaca Muerta, while reaffirming the Mapuche commitment, renewed during this Wiñoy Xipantv, to continue defending the *mapu* (land-territory) from the encroachment of extractivist industries. The statement also denounced the escalating levels of soil, air, and water pollution caused by fracking, the improper handling of oil waste, the proliferation of open-air pools for drilling waste, and the lack of essential services (water, gas, and electricity) for both the communities of Xawvn Ko and the broader population. This critique was framed in stark contrast to the wealth and energy produced by Vaca Muerta on a national and international scale,

underscoring the rising poverty and unfulfilled promises of development linked to the Mega project.

In light of the accounts of this ceremony, we can interpret the Wiñoy Xipantv as a moment in which the performance of ethnicity, as described by Briones and Siffredi (1989), emerges through a series of diacritics. These elements not only display but enact Mapuche identity, while simultaneously positioning the ceremony within broader processes of self-determination and resurgence in response to historical subjugation – both the legacy of genocide and the current threats posed by oil extraction that continue to oppress the Mapuche people. These diacritics, far from being superficial symbols or mere strategic choices, are rooted in cultural and ceremonial protocols that give this celebration its performative dimension. These protocols consist of rules that are reproduced and transmitted across time and space, and in the context of resistance, they generate new anti-extractivist aesthetics.

Here, I draw on María del Rosario Acosta López's (2022, 149) concept of aesthetics as a political task, where aesthetics initiate 'unsuspected possibilities through the inventive capacities that arise with resistance.' For the philosopher, these aesthetics make audible what epistemic violence has rendered inaudible and illegible, transforming these actions into creative acts of resistance that interrupt the silencing. Thus, considering the Wiñoy Xipantv ceremony held in Vaca Muerta as an aesthetic of resistance allows us to view it as a performative act that, beyond reproducing the cultural values and patterns of the Mapuche people, directly challenges the extractivist future assigned to the site where the ceremonial space is erected. This performance underscores alternative modes of territorial defence. However, this aesthetic of resistance should not be viewed solely as combative or reactive, as one might see in direct actions. On the contrary, its strategic execution involves processes of Mapuche resurgence, both personal and communal, and the transmission and recovery of cultural, philosophical, and spiritual knowledge. In this way, these aesthetics are not only forms of resistance but also acts of creative renewal.

Conclusions

Shortly before finishing the first submission of this paper, the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko carried out new direct actions in Vaca Muerta, blocking access to all fracking waste treatment plants, identifying these so-called 'oil dumps' as critical nodes in the hydrocarbon production

chain. The communities maintained these blockades at five treatment sites for 48 hours, aiming to pressure the provincial government to resume previously agreed commitments. These included the registration of the legal entities of five communities, the implementation of the Law of Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation approved in 2023, and the continuation of the territorial survey initiated the previous year. The atmosphere was tense, with threats of eviction from the companies looming and further aggravated by Security Minister Patricia Bullrich's public calls for the governor of Neuquén to take repressive action. She even threatened to deploy federal forces herself and urged oil companies to house groups from the Productive Safety Unit within their facilities in Añelo to assist in the eviction of the Mapuche. After hours of intense negotiations between community leaders and provincial government authorities at the blockade site, an agreement was reached. The government committed to resuming the outstanding measures, while the Mapuche lifted the blockades and returned to their communities.

Despite this outcome, the situation was very tense as it was clear that the political landscape had shifted, and forced eviction was an imminent threat, in line with security policies under Milei's government. Just as during the Macri administration, when violent state operations targeted Mapuche communities, resulting in two deaths and the intimidation of Lof Campo Maripe in Vaca Muerta, the threat of renewed violence remains palpable in Xawvn Ko territory.

Simultaneously, the media continued to stigmatize the communities, spreading false narratives that misrepresented the blockades as affecting the general population and industry, when in reality, only access to the waste treatment plants was obstructed. These actions were also framed as extortion, rather than environmental defence. However, these logics of criminalization and prejudice were once again countered by the ten communities of the Regional Coalition Xawvn Ko present during this action. The diacritics of Mapuche ethnicity – flags, clothing, musical instruments, and dawn ceremonies – came to the forefront, reaffirming cultural identity amidst the protest of the Mapuche people in Vaca Muerta. These cultural markers, through their performances and aesthetics, reinforced intergenerational bonds among adults, children, and the land, asserting resistance against criminalization for defending Indigenous rights, and demonstrating the power of inter-community political action against repression and the new dispossessions driven by extractivism in Vaca Muerta.

Just as a rewe, a ceremonial space, was erected in one of the most affected areas by fracking, reviving communication with the natural forces and restoring cultural and spiritual practices long silenced by Indigenous genocide, these actions – ranging from the strictest to the least strict protocols – can be understood as part of a broader political aesthetic. While rooted in traditions and knowledge transmitted intergenerationally despite historical subjugation, these actions serve as sociocultural and political interventions that challenge the dominant extractivist order. They articulate new forms of resistance against extractivism, interweaving cultural, spiritual, philosophical, and political aesthetics. These anti-extractivist struggles of the Mapuche people in Vaca Muerta, in addition to being acts of denunciation and resistance, embody creative, dynamic processes that continuously redefine their existence and pre-existence in their ancestral territory.

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