



The Limits of Care

Vitality, Enchantment, and Emergent Environmental Ethics among the Mapuche People

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Abstract Drawing on the experiences of caring in agriculture and forestry among Mapuche landholders of Chile, this article advances a definition of care as an act of relating intervening mutual articulations of vitality. Caring for nonhumans entails a reflexive awareness of the ontological and ethical limits of human care, limits made visible by the nonhumans' potentials to respond to our actions and affect us. Reflections on the limits of care foster an attentiveness to the conditions responsible for nonhumans' ability of enchantment, a term that in Bennett's proposal concerns an awareness on the singularity and surprising character of life. First, this article characterizes care as a human intentional action targeting dependent nonhumans, such as crops. Second, it illustrates the recalcitrance of some nonhumans to human care, as in the case of forests in Indigenous southern Chile. Third, it shows how care emerges from ethical aspirations and concerns, such as those at the core of Mapuche engagements with cultural reclamation and conservation.

Keywords care, enchantment, Mapuche, domestication, agriculture, conservation, Chile

When should one take care of nonhuman life? And when should one stop doing so? The two questions are at the core of a critical inquiry into care as a global ethical idiom emerging amid social and ecological crisis. As reflected by a growing academic interest in this topic care remains an omnipresent and yet elusive concept.¹ Care can materialize in relations of domination as much as solidarity. This is because care is not simply a moral imperative but also a practical action addressing coexistence, as in Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto's seminal definition of care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible."² While care is an intentional action, it is never a univocal engagement with

1. Fisher and Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring"; Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*; Martin, Myers, and Viseu, "Politics of Care in Technoscience"; Mol et al., *Care in Practice*.

2. Fisher and Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," 19.

others imagined as passive recipients. Care unfolds in affective contexts where nonhuman responsiveness makes a priori differentiation between subjects and objects of care difficult. As María Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us, “Care is a human trouble, but this does not make of care a human-only matter.”³ The ontological dimension of care is visible in one of its main outcomes: the emergence of affective entanglements, which as suggested by Sebastian Ureta concerns the transformative process in which carers become affected by the entities we care for and as such “become matters of care to us.”⁴ As entanglements are always unpredictable and chaotic, care is never free from unsettling manifestations, as shown by feminist critiques on the unequal effects that this action holds for those at both ends of this relation.⁵ In caring, the prospect of domination and exclusion is latent, since care is “a selective mode of attention [that] circumscribes and cherishes some things, lives, or phenomena as its objects,” while excluding others.⁶

Inspired by reflections on affective and problematic dimensions of this phenomenon, my answer to the questions of when we should care for nonhuman life and when we should stop doing so begins with the acknowledgment that vitality is a primary locus of care. Unlike traditional vitalism, which assumed vitality as an ontologically given condition, contemporary attention to vitality has emphasized the inseparability of materiality and affect.⁷ Vitality can be a condition engendered by an external force animating specific entities. It can also stem from the power of matter and energy to engender mutual influences between beings.⁸ A focus on vitality helps in recognizing that relations of care unfold within a continuum marked by dependence and recalcitrance of the nonhuman other that is subject to human care. It also reminds that care “involves material engagement in labours to sustain interdependent worlds, labours that are often associated with exploitation and domination.”⁹ Agricultural labor exemplifies the uncertain boundary between care as exploitation and care as the fostering of others’ vitality.

My answer to the questions of when care toward nonhumans is needed and when it becomes a hindrance to nonhuman vitality is inspired by experiences and reflections on agriculture and forestry among Indigenous Mapuche landholders from Chile. *Care* (*cuidado*) is today a recurrent term in conversations around rural areas. Its meanings are multiple. Care can be directed to domestic plants and animals that require work to properly grow; it is an attitude helping landholders to be vigilant toward dangers they might encounter; and, more generally, care can also mean protection toward the environment. This emergent ethics of care has historically originated in recent intersections between

3. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 2.

4. Ureta, “Caring for Waste,” 1535.

5. Martin, Myers, and Viseu, “Politics of Care in Technoscience.”

6. Martin, Myers, and Viseu, “Politics of Care in Technoscience,” 627.

7. See Duarte, “Vitality of Vitalism.”

8. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

9. Puig de la Bellacasa, “Nothing Comes without Its World,” 198.

two overlapping processes: conservation and cultural reclamation, a project aimed at reactivating Indigenous cultural values and notions in ways that are meaningful to contemporary aspiration of self-governance.¹⁰ These two forces have deeply impacted the lives of many Mapuche landholders who have embarked on personal trajectories of education in Indigenous cosmology and in environmental ethics by engaging with conservation institutions and grassroots organizations.

Drawing on conversations and ethnographic observation on the meanings and instantiations of care, I show that caring is a reflexive and relational process in which Mapuche landholders learn about the ethical and ontological limits of their own acts of care. In the lived world of Mapuche farmers, the limits of care are ontological because certain nonhumans are found to be recalcitrant to human care. These limits are also ethical, since the action of not taking care, in this case, is essential to the continuity of the vitality of some nonhumans. The limits of care are encountered in affective contexts in which nonhumans respond to human care with differential consequences. Responsiveness, I argue, unfolds along a continuum of need and refusal of human care. The two poles are unstable, so that any a priori distinction between nonhumans dependent and recalcitrant to care would be a simplistic representation. Nonetheless, forms of non-human life are ontologically divergent insofar as their vitality is more or less dependent on human care. In the first section of this article I explore landholders' engagement with crops, whose vitality is conceptualized as a direct consequence of farmers' care. In the second section I explore what care means in engagements with forests, whose vitality rests on human abilities to distance themselves from forest beings and negotiate necessary engagements in the pursuit of agricultural tasks. The unruly vitality of forests is associated with their autonomous nature. The idea of autonomy here is not equivalent to a denial of forests as relational entities. Forests, even those in southern Chile treated as endangered and native by conservation actors, are assemblages shaped by human activities, whose traces are scattered across the forest landscape. Autonomy thus refers to the potential of some beings to respond to the actions of the others without being determined by them, as is the case of heteronomous entities such as crops. In the experiences of Mapuche landholders the autonomy of forests is associated with their unpredictable responsiveness to human actions. Forests are recalcitrant to human care because their vitality does not depend on it. Forestry therefore is incapable of domesticating forests under irreversible conditions. Unlike crops, attempts to domesticate forests are inevitably conducive to their depletion. Forestry is ideally practiced as a diplomatic engagement with forests for the extraction of resources. Caring for, in this context, means either disengagement or a careful engagement.

Caring entails learning when nonhuman others need, refuse, or are even erased by care. Caring for nonhuman vitality is thus constitutive as much as animated by an attentiveness to the singularity of nonhuman life, its constant change, and its ability to

10. See Lewis, *Sovereign Entrepreneurs*, 120.

surprise us. Attentiveness to the transformative and affective potentials of nonhumans implies a relation of durability, best captured by the idea of enchantment. As caring materializes into a durable relation built on constant attentiveness and its future projection, the beings we care for necessarily enchant us. As suggested by Jane Bennett in her pivotal reflection on enchantment, this refers to an action-oriented form of attentiveness with ethical potentials.¹¹ As Stine Krøijer and Cecilie Rubow remind us, enchantment of the world “translates into ecological responsibilities and modes of care” through which humans do not protect nature but instead intentionally reconfigure ecological networks in which their life is inserted.¹² For Bennett “enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies.”¹³ Care and enchantment are in mutual articulation insofar as only through caring we become aware of the indeterminacy of nonhuman responses to our actions and their abilities to demarcate the limits of our care.

Care as Concern: Agricultural Labor

The reflections on care that I present in this article are drawn from conversations and observations that have taken place over the years in rural areas around two towns, Traiguén and Currarehue, located in the southern Chilean region of Araucanía.¹⁴ Most of my interlocutors are members of *comunidades Indígenas* (Indigenous communities), administrative units represented by elected board members. *Comunidades* correspond only in part to *reducciones*, the collective land plots assigned to Mapuche populations after the annexation of their territories, *wallmapu*, in the late nineteenth century following the military invasion of the Chilean and Argentinean armies.¹⁵ Soon after the Mapuche territories were declared state-owned properties, they were subject to land auctions benefiting mostly European settlers (*colonxs*)¹⁶ and, to a lesser degree, Chilean migrants from other parts of the country.¹⁷ Land redistribution was poorly regulated so that a

11. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*.

12. Krøijer and Rubow, “Enchanted Ecologies and Ethics of Care,” 2.

13. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 4.

14. Fieldwork was carried out in Spanish. Most of my interlocutors are not fluent in the Mapuche language, Mapudungun (also found as Chedungun or Mapuzugun), even though they are familiar with terms and concepts specific to Mapuche cosmology. The town of Traiguén, located in the more fertile area of the central section of southern Chile, experienced a short-lived but spectacular growth of agricultural production in the early twentieth century. Owing to the little productivity associated with the *latifundo* system, Traiguén entered a long period of stagnation (see Di Giminiari, *Sentient Lands*, 23–24). Untouched by the early twentieth-century agricultural boom, in the last three decades Currarehue turned from a remote frontier outpost to an emergent tourist attraction in the heart of the lake district in Chile (see Huillíñir-Curío, “De senderos a paisajes”).

15. *Wallmapu* is the preferred term of Mapuche activists for the once sovereign Indigenous territories of southern Chile. In Chile the military invasion of the Mapuche region came to be known euphemistically as Pacification of Araucanía (1861–83), as its official objective was to put a halt to clashes between early settlers and Mapuche. For the Mapuche population the death toll of the campaign was of genocidal dimension.

16. I use the gender-neutral *x* ending for mixed groups.

minority of settlers quickly capitalized and consolidated their land purchases into large agricultural estates known as *fundos*, where Mapuche rural residents and poor Chilean migrants worked side by side under exploitative conditions. Unable to purchase land outside the *reducción*, the Mapuche population became increasingly vulnerable to land shortage, a process accelerated by illegal transactions by non-Indigenous buyers. Today, land within most *comunidades* is divided into small private plots rarely exceeding ten hectares, a significantly smaller amount in comparison with non-Indigenous landowners. Land shortage left many Mapuche people from rural areas with few alternatives other than precarious employment in nearby agricultural estates or migration to urban centers, such as the capital Santiago, where currently over a third of the entire Mapuche population is located.¹⁸

Owing to a chronic crisis in small-scale farming caused mostly by competition from agribusiness actors and lack of concrete state support, Mapuche landholders have increasingly relied on other, more irregular sources of cash flow, such as seasonal agricultural employment or remittances from family members. A farmstead within a *comunidad* typically includes pasture areas for husbandry, a garden (*huerta*), an orchard in most cases with apple trees, chicken and pig sheds, areas designated for cereal production, and patches of trees serving as windbreaks and sources of timber for domestic use and more rarely for commercial timber.¹⁹ Family farming provides crops for domestic consumption and cash flow through activities like the sale of garden products in town markets and the more sporadic commercialization of cattle and timber. While livestock ownership is often limited to fewer than ten heads of cattle and a handful of sheep, it is regarded as the most defining and rewarding activity for any smallholder in southern Chile, for whom the sale of a cow represents a major cash injection, especially in times of economic need.

Mapuche and non-Indigenous landholders, commonly referred to by the former as *chilenxs* (Chilean), or *winka*, a more derogatory term working as a synonym for *invaders*, are accustomed to work side by side. Half-share agreements often involve non-Indigenous townspeople, and a consistent proportion of households within any *comunidad* are composed by interethnic marriages. While disparity in profit and access to technology between small and large landholders is evident, there are no farming practices or technologies that unambiguously separate Mapuche and *chilenxs* smallholders. Even when

17. Bengoa, *Mapuches, colonos y el estado nacional*; Marimán, “Los Mapuche.”

18. As reported in the latest national census in 2017, 1,745,147 Chilean citizens identify as Mapuche, a figure corresponding to 9.9 percent of the national population. 35 percent of the Mapuche population live in the metropolitan region, home to the capital Santiago. See Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, <https://www.censo2017.cl> (accessed December 13, 2021).

19. The degree to which land will be used for certain agricultural activities over others depends on the location of the homestead. Mountainous areas, for instance, are typically less productive for crops and more prone to forestry and cattle husbandry.

in practice farming activities are the same, their socio-ecological effects are reflected upon from different perspectives among Mapuche and their non-Indigenous neighbors. In conversations held with Mapuche landholders, the effects of agricultural labor on nonhuman vitality are typically assessed in relation to the observed growth process of crops. The potentiality of humans in directing nonhuman vitality is a recurrent theme in pastoral and agricultural societies, where conceptualizations of vitality and human-environmental relationships tend to highlight human paternalism as a necessary condition for the existence of domesticated species.²⁰ As a key ontological articulator, domestication entails the objectivation of nonhumans, including their conversion into units with standard economic values, as in the customary Mapuche use of the Mapudungun term *kullin* to refer interchangeably to money and livestock.²¹ Relations of domestication rarely materialize in a process of production *ex nihilo*. Their effects are instead shaped by indeterminate mutual responses between the domesticator and the domesticated.²² As Tim Ingold suggested, “The work that people do in such activities as field clearance, fencing, planting, weeding and so on, or in tending their livestock does not literally make plants and animals, but rather establishes the environmental conditions for their growth and development.”²³

Domestication is intended to foster nonhuman vitality by instituting ideal conditions for growth. Across different social milieus, this principle is expressed through analogies with parenthood.²⁴ I have become familiar with this analogy in conversations with Mapuche landholders. I owe most of the things I have learned about agriculture in southern Chile to the late Liscán Contreras, a teacher who has marked my life for the best like no other. On one occasion, while tilling the soil around potatoes soon to be harvested, Liscán pointed at a group of potatoes that were remarkably smaller than the rest and said: “See, those are *papas wuncha*. It means that they are orphans, just like those children who have been neglected and grew up by themselves.” Liscán explained to me that these potatoes (*papas*) were orphans (*wuncha*), because they had not been sown properly and thus were forced to grow up too close to others and compete for nutrients. He added that they were unlikely to endure through the winter. Taking care of crops also means to be constantly vigilant about threats such as pigs feeding on planted plots or the fast expansion of parasitic bushes, commonly indicated with the suggestive Spanish term *maleza*, alluding to their bad (*mala*) nature to the farmer’s eye. The fight against *malezas*, carried out through tools, and increasingly less so by localized application of fire, finds a further justification in the association of the spread of scrub with colonization drawn by some of my interlocutors. In the early twentieth century settlers used

20. Pálsson, “Human-Environmental Relations,” 74.

21. Di Giminiani, *Sentient Lands*, 92.

22. See Swanson, Lien, and Ween, “Introduction.”

23. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 87.

24. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 86.

malezas to demarcate their properties, often beyond their legal limits into nearby Indigenous land. Eventually, *malezas* grew out of control, standing today as an inexorable threat to the proper growth of crops.

Caring for crops is an action of control but also one concerned with the mitigation of the inevitable depletion that comes with small-scale agriculture. Land shortage has compelled Mapuche landholders to intensify production in increasingly small properties, which are in turn decreasingly productive. As was told to me on different occasions by more senior farmers, back in their youth it seems that crops needed very little to grow, unlike now when fertilizers seem less and less effective. Liscán once explained to me how caring for crops prompts farmers to pay attention to the responsiveness of land itself: “We have to care for the land and protect it. The land will give you back only what you gave it.” Giving to the land here refers to multiple actions aimed at helping the land recover from the impact of agriculture. Tilling the soil, removing scrubs, applying fertilizers but limiting their use, and implementing reasonable fallow periods in consideration of economic pressures are all actions intended to help the land give you back crops. The idea of giving as a mutual relationship between land and farmers reveals a configuration of soil not as “natural matter” waiting to be transformed by human action, but as a composition of “living worlds that are inextricable from their ecological relationalities.”²⁵

Ideas about people-land mutuality are explicitly present in many Indigenous cosmologies along the south American Andes.²⁶ Mapuche is no exception insofar as *mapu*, a term commonly translated in Spanish as *land* but also referring to the more political term *territory*, is generally characterized as a sum of forces responsive to human actions and capable of shaping social life for dwellers of specific localities.²⁷ The characterization of land as a sentient entity is just one side of the human-land relation, which simultaneously figures as an object of care by humans, one of property, and one of potential exploitation by farmers themselves. In this context care appears as the attempt to strike an ideal balance between exploitation of natural resources and their preservation, something that in practice always dangerously leans toward the first scenario.

The ideas and practices of care toward vegetal life I have depicted so far remind us that domestication is always a partial and reversible process dependent on the effects of labor by past generations beyond the farmer’s intention.²⁸ The acknowledgment of domestication as an indeterminate affective relation presupposes the recognition that vegetal agency is inserted “in a natural system understood not as a mechanical order of fixed laws, but as the scene of not-fully-predictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants.”²⁹ In Mapuche farmers’ engagement with crops care is animated by a sense

25. Lyons, *Vital Decomposition*, 33. See also Salazar et al., “Thinking with Soils,” 8.

26. Sheild Johanson, “Mountain Ate His Heart,” 15.

27. Quidel and Jineo, “Las raíces para nuestro cultivo.”

28. Swanson, Lien, and Ween, “Introduction,” 13.

29. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 97.

of responsibility toward the vitality of nonhuman others. In this context care is understood as a human action, on which the vitality of nonhumans is dependent.³⁰ Yet care unfolds in a world where human intentionality is bracketed. As conceptualized in contemporary reflections on vitalism, vitality appears as an indeterminate force activated by multiple cosmological relationships.³¹ The farmer appears as the main facilitator of vegetal vitality. Yet their action is inserted in a web of material relationships in which, rather than an inert object waiting to be vitalized by an external force, matter can be a life force in itself, as in the case of soil.³² Each act of domestication and agricultural care is partly inspired by past actions, and partly capable of revealing unpredictable responses by humans through which the limits of care are constantly demarcated. Human ontological centrality in ensuring others' vitality is precarious, since contingent responses by nonhumans such as plants constantly reshuffle the limits of care by drawing attention to human failures to ensure nonhuman vitality, as might be the case of crops growing in exploited soils or left unattended.

In the experiences of Mapuche farmers care unfolds as a set of repetitive actions intervening in the growth process of domesticated life. Nonhuman responsiveness to care can vary, but it never turns out to be completely indeterminate. While in this context care is a habitual action, it cannot be stabilized in a set of replicable practices. Caring for dependent nonhumans translates into a type of enchantment marked by the sentiment of concern (*preocupación*), a term frequently employed by my interlocutors to explain the hardship of small-scale farming. For most Mapuche landholders being concerned is a latent state rather than a feeling aroused from a moment of crisis. Repetition in caring for crops might appear dull, but it has clear enchanting potential, since iteration always occurs in unique contexts in which human labor faces constantly changing life assemblages. For Bennett enchantment persists once it is cultivated through conjuring and repetitions, which do not converge onto replicable situations but, rather, produce always slightly different perceptions of the world, reminding us how “that-which-repeats itself also *transforms* itself.”³³ This quotidian form of enchantment contrasts openly with another relation of enchantment, that of forest life, animated by awe, surprise, and fear. As we see next, differences in these two ways of being enchanted can be drawn back to the fact that nonhuman vitality depends on human distancing rather than engagement.

Fear and Respect: Forest Engagements

In Mapuche farmers' experiences nonhumans recognized to be equipped with a heightened vitality are commonly found among specific categories of topographic features

30. See Course, “Woman Who Shed Her Skin.”

31. Duarte, “Vitality of Vitalism,” 5.

32. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 51.

33. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 40.

such as watercourses and forests. Within the same categories some entities can be more vital than others. There are two possible explanations for the unequal concentration of vitality in some nonhumans. The first explanation is that entities such as forests and rivers are animated by powerful and often dangerous forces that are not susceptible to human care and domestication. The second explanation draws on two related principles in Mapuche cosmology: the relational nature of *newen* and the role of spirit masters *ngen*. *Newen*, a term occasionally translated in Spanish by Mapuche rural residents as *fuerza* (force), is an ethereal, volitional, and highly mobile entity.³⁴ It is both internal to some entities, including humans, who are animated by it, and external, acting as mediator of relations among humans and nonhumans capable of giving and receiving it.³⁵ Specific tracts of land and topographic features, such as mountains and forests, are considered capable of infusing *newen* into human and nonhuman dwellers more than others. Humans can also direct *newen*, as in the case of healing practices and collective rituals performed, among many other reasons, to favor the exchange of this vital force.³⁶ While the term *ngen* has been commonly translated as “spirit master,” *espíritus dueños*, in Spanish,³⁷ it hardly fits within notions of ownership, since it also encompasses a sense of guardianship, as indicated by José Quidel.³⁸ *Ngen* are hypostases for general environmental features such as water or hills, as well as entities corresponding to specific features of the landscape.³⁹ The only exception to the meaning of this term is *Chao Ngenchen*, roughly translatable as “master spirit of people,”⁴⁰ a deity often described by rural Mapuche residents as equivalent to the Christian god. *Ngen* are rarely visible, but they can manifest themselves through different appearances, as in the case of the floating skin of a black bull (*kürü kullin*) associated with the most ubiquitous and possibly powerful master spirit, that of water, *ngenko*. *Ngen* spirit masters are considered unpredictable and potentially dangerous to humans witnessing their presence. Their sighting might anticipate a future tragedy to the witness or to someone close, or it could presage imminent danger, including getting lost in the forest.⁴¹

The vitality of powerful nonhumans appears linked to their association with *newen* and *ngen* spirits. This association, however, should not lead us to an essentialist rendition of Mapuche rural life whereby cosmological knowledge per se is sufficient to explain dynamic understandings of nonhuman vitality. The unequal effects of colonial

34. Course, *Becoming Mapuche*, 48; Ñanculef, *Tayñ mapuche kimün*, 47.

35. Skewes et al., “La regeneración de los bosques,” 17.

36. An ideal setting for human exchanges of *newen* is the most known ritual in Mapuche society, the *ngillatun*. It consists of a two- to three-day event carried out to express gratitude and raise petitions to the main deity Chao Ngenchen. For more on the *ngillatun*, see Alonqueo, *Instituciones religiosas del pueblo Mapuche*; Ñanculef, *Tayñ mapuche kimün*.

37. Grebe, “Algunos paralelismos.”

38. Quidel, “El quiebre ontológico,” 717.

39. Bonelli, “On People,” 70.

40. Alonqueo, *Instituciones religiosas del pueblo Mapuche*, 223.

41. Di Giminiiani, *Sentient Lands*, 93–100.

assimilation across Mapuche rural areas explain why some of my interlocutors explicitly indicate cosmological entities as responsible for the vitality of nonhumans, while others seem skeptical about their role, in particular among those members of more radical Evangelical churches for which adherence to Mapuche cosmology is incompatible with Christian faith.⁴² This is not to say that cosmology matters only for those individuals with more knowledge. Mapuche skeptics and even *winkas* are not precluded from feeling the vitality of nonhuman life through the indeterminate and possible presence of *ngen* spirit masters and *newen* forces.⁴³ Understandings of nonhuman vitality are in fact articulated not only as manifestations of known cosmological principles but also as reflections of embodied everyday engagements with vegetal life. Beside their association with *ngen* and *newen*, two other features are shared by particularly vital nonhumans: their unpredictable nature and autonomy in relation to human care and attempts to control them. Entities that are recognized as resolutely autonomous are also highly unpredictable and therefore should be approached by humans with care (*cuidado*), a term that in conversations with Mapuche landholders is used to indicate caution and thus differs from the type of care directed toward domesticated plants and animals.

In mountainous areas, such as those around the town of Currarehue, Mapuche landholders enter forests for different reasons: to log; to graze cattle, especially for the occasion of summer cattle transhumance (*veranada*); to gather non-timber forest goods, such as the Araucaria nut (*piñon*);⁴⁴ and for recreational purposes such as hosting visitors from urban centers or in a few cases taking tourists on mountain tours organized by local Mapuche entrepreneurs. Most of my interlocutors would typically refer to the woods in Spanish as *bosque*, even though they are also familiar with the Mapudungun term, *mawida*, a term that applies equally to mountains and forests. A forest typically designates a space populated by multiple entities, notably trees, but it is also treated as an entity in its own right. The term *forest* generally stands in opposition to *timber plantation* (*plantación*), where historically imported fast-growing species, such as *Pinus radiata* and *Eucalyptus globulus*, are harvested and commercialized mostly as construction material. While most plantations in southern Chile are owned by transnational timber companies, smaller versions can be found within a *comunidad*.⁴⁵ For farmers across southern Chile, fast-growing plantation species differ significantly from native species in

42. Since the 1980s Evangelical congregations, many of them led by missionaries from the United States, have established self-organized religious communities in Mapuche rural areas where the presence of the Catholic church was scant. See González Gálvez, *Los Mapuches y sus otros*, 220–31.

43. González Gálvez, *Los Mapuches y sus otros*, 94.

44. The nut (*piñon*) grows on the *Araucaria araucana*, the monkey puzzle tree native to the southern Cone. Customarily, it has been a staple food for the Mapuche population in the Andean areas of southern Chile who in many cases identify with the ethnonym *Pewenche*, literally, the people of the *Araucaria* tree.

45. Timber plantations were first developed in Chile during the first half of the twentieth century as part of a governmental project set out to promote scientific forestry and reverse the effects of deforestation associated with settlers' expansion. Forest plantations of exported species grew dramatically in size during Pinochet's dictatorship thanks to the introduction of industrial development policies benefiting transnational companies

their environmental and economic impact. Given their slower growth and legal restrictions concerning their extraction, native trees are indeed less economically attractive than fast-growing plantation species. Yet, unlike water-demanding cash crop species, native trees are thought of as beneficial to the circulation of subterranean water. While in practice native and imported species often coexist side by side, and the term *wood* (*bosque*) is usually extended to actual plantations, the difference between these two assemblages remains pervasive, as forests are not treated as agricultural spaces that require human care to flourish, while plantation trees are grown just like crops.

Across multiple social milieus, forests are often thought of in opposition to gardens and other domesticated spaces.⁴⁶ One of the plausible reasons for the peculiarities of forests might be in their ability to engender new perceptive frameworks for those navigating their land- and soundscape. As suggested by Eduardo Kohn the power of forests resides in their ability to participate morphologically in the articulation of human semiosis: “Humans do not just impose form on tropical forest: the forest proliferates it.”⁴⁷ In Mapuche rural areas, the affective power of forests is acknowledged through a widespread perception that *newen* and *ngen* concentrate in these spaces and they provoke a unique sense of awe. As described by Teresa, a Mapuche educator residing outside Currehue, forested mountains have always had a positive impact on her: “The beauty of these place makes you want to stay there forever, because it is there that you can connect with the power of the mountain (*cordillera*). It feels like your head is changed by a whole different air, a force.” Experiences provoked by mountains and forests rich in *newen* are not simply spiritually enriching; they also encompass a sense of fear generated by the unpredictable behavior of mountains, forests, and the spirit masters, or *ngen*, associated with them. Community members might praise the beauty of forests, but they prefer to venture in these spaces only when necessary, recognizing that there are many dangers to anyone walking in a forest. One of the most recurrent threats is the possibility for anyone, especially unexperienced visitors such as trekkers, to get lost under swiftly changing weather conditions. While fear of forests is shared by non-Indigenous and Mapuche landholders, for the latter, there is a further specific reason for the dangers of forests: forests are generally endowed with agential abilities to respond to and even retaliate against human actions when needed.

Forestry and other agricultural activities taking place around forests require a particular form of care, one aimed at ensuring the mitigation of possible threats posed by mountains and forests to humans. In forest engagements care is intended not to help domestication or growth for vegetal entities but, rather, to establish a diplomatic balance between engagement and disengagement with vegetal life. Care is essential to

dedicated to timber export through measures including tax easements. For more on Chile's forest history see Klubock, *La frontera*; Camus, *Ambiente*.

46. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 41–43.

47. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 182.

negotiate movement across and extraction of resources around forests, watercourses, and mountains. The need for a careful conduct around forests and mountains is epitomized by the idea of “respect,” *respeto* in Spanish, *yewen* in Mapudungun. Among Mapuche landholders respect is frequently mentioned as a quintessential feature of customary social life. Respect is an attitude inspired by the recognition of the other’s will and autonomy.⁴⁸ Respect can materialize through exchanges of greetings, as well as through gifts that help consolidate mutual trust and a symmetrical relation with the person involved in this relationship. In the context of environmental engagement one can be respectful toward *ngen* and other powerful nonhumans by avoiding disrespectful actions such as setting campfires or raising voices while moving across forests. Respect is also instantiated through ritualistic acts such as the recital of an incantation known as *llellipun*,⁴⁹ or a more personal appeal through which one asks permission for carrying out tasks such as logging a tree to the corresponding *ngen*. While this practice is now performed only in ceremonies, it is a reminder of intersubjectivity as a condition for appropriate care toward forests.

The recalcitrance of forests to domestication bears a significant implication in the definition of human care. Forestry is incapable of permanently transforming the forest world into a domesticated form. When engaging with forests humans can either negatively impact the vitality of forests and even cause their depletion or consciously limit the impact of their labor. Elder Mapuche landholders vividly remember the profound changes caused by deforestation, mostly attributed to settlers’ expansion and clearing strategies but also, to a lesser degree, to their own predecessors in need of timber for construction and heating. Forests’ history of retreat and growth is intimately intertwined with intergenerational processes of expansion, persistence, and abandonment of agricultural land.⁵⁰ Under the conundrum of having to preserve and exploit forests at the same time, “care” appears not as a set of actions facilitating domestication and growth of nonhuman life, as was the case for crops, but rather an ideal attitude through which a balance between preservation and extraction of nonhuman vitality is possible. As suggested by John Law in his depiction of veterinarians’ responses to the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom, care “is about responding, but not responding too much. It is about being there, about sensitivity, and yet it is also about distance. It is about self-protection. Learning how to balance empathy and distance as part of a professional training.”⁵¹ Law’s emphasis on the centrality of distancing in framing ideal relations of care resonates with the types of forest engagements described so far, in which caring materializes in the alternation of engagement and disengagement. Caring for forests appears as a learning process focused on the ethical and

48. Course, *Becoming Mapuche*, 56.

49. Ñanculef, *Tayin mapuche kimün*, 52.

50. Skewes et al., “La regeneración de los bosques,” 10.

51. Law, “Care and Killing,” 64.

ontological limits of human care, in other words, learning when human care is not beneficial to nonhuman vitality and can even cause its demise, and when it fails to have any significant impact. This type of care translates into a perceptive openness to the world marked by feelings of awe as much as fear. As Bennett reminds us, enchantment is always a mix of charm and disturbance, originating in the realization that senses and perceptions are intensified, and with them a comforting sense of order and familiarity can dissolve.⁵² Being enchanted by autonomous nonhumans can provoke fear, but it can also elicit care or, as seen in the case of Mapuche rural life, respect. Cosmological knowledge about the relations and entities behind the particularly vital nonhumans helps Mapuche landholders to be open to their enchantment.

The Future of Care: Indigenous Reclamation and Conservation

While concerns over assimilation run deep in the history of Mapuche activism, it was not until the 1990s that they acquired notable public visibility. After the end of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–90) in 1990, a large and diverse social movement had secured the unprecedented recognition of Indigenous rights in fields as diverse as education, development, and political representation.⁵³ On the one hand, radical acts of mobilization such as land takeovers (*tomas*) of properties lost to settlers in the nineteenth century were met with police repression and application of anti-terrorist measures. On the other, governments have also introduced multicultural reforms, inspired largely by neoliberal principles of industrial development and cultural commodification.⁵⁴ While Indigenous people in Chile enjoy fewer collective rights than in neighboring countries, multicultural reforms encompassed land reparation and endowment programs that had a significant economic impact for those rural residents awarded with subsidies.⁵⁵ Partly favored by this new wave of multicultural reforms, and partly coordinated as autonomous political actions, projects aimed at the revitalization of Mapuche knowledge and language have emerged as part of a broader struggle for decolonization. Today schools with a significant proportion of Mapuche pupils offer courses on Indigenous culture and language held by Mapuche experts, formally recognized as “traditional educators” (*educadores tradicionales*).

Cultural reclamation extends beyond classrooms. It materializes in the reactivation of rituals and customary practices such as craftsmanship and the emergence of regional networks bringing together community leaders. Many Mapuche rural residents

52. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 34.

53. Pairicán, *Malón*; Marimán, *Autodeterminación*.

54. Richards, *Race and the Chilean Miracle*.

55. While programs targeting Indigenous populations extend to all governmental areas, the main state agency for Indigenous issues, CONADI (Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena), oversees the largest programs such as the land endowment system (see Bauer, *Negotiating Autonomy*). At the time of writing, a constitutional convention with reserved seats for members of Indigenous first nations is responsible for the drafting of a new constitution, which many Indigenous activists hope will pave the way for unprecedented possibilities of self-governance.

have engaged with cultural revitalization projects as platforms from which they could develop personal trajectories of self-education in Mapuche religion and language, and thus reverse their lamented condition of being *winka*-like, or *awinkadx*. With its emphasis on human affective links to nonhuman life, cultural revitalization is capable of infusing a predisposition for perceptive attention to nonhuman vitality and the elusive elements that constitute it. Socio-environmental values such as respect figure as key articulators of an Indigenous ethics recovered and readapted to present times. As an idea with multiple meanings, respect does not translate into standardized practices or behaviors. Instead this notion animates ongoing ethical reflections on existing engagements with humans and nonhumans. In cultural revitalization programs questions such as whether we should intervene with nonhuman life hold a central place. Cultural revitalization programs are not mere processes of knowledge transfer; they prompt attendees to redefine existing social and environmental practices in relation to the ideal of respect thanks to participatory methods. Far from being a nostalgic recovery of the past, the reclamation of Mapuche ethics involves a resignification of one's daily practices and behaviors within cosmological principles whose definition remains open.

The resignification of care as an ethical idiom is central not only to cultural reclamation but also to conservation. Conservation has unfolded as a part of the processes of dispossession beginning with settler expansion through the expansion of protected areas. Conflicts between Mapuche rural population and conservation actors, such as the forest service CONAF (Corporación Nacional Forestal), revolve around access to areas customarily used for agricultural activities like grazing and forest product collection, as well as inequalities concerning bids for ecotourism enterprises in and around protected areas.⁵⁶ However, conservation has also offered alliances with governmental and nongovernmental actors to push agendas for resource protection and has provided new means to articulate an environmental ethical discourse sensitive to Mapuche aspirations.⁵⁷

The idiom of care has permeated political claims over co-management and natural-resource use of national parks by Mapuche political organizations. An example can help us to understand how, far from being a stable cultural feature of Mapuche society, care has been reconfigured as part of Indigenous engagements with conservation politics. During the 1990s a group of local Mapuche landholders living not far from the southern town of Currarehue mobilized to demand land use within a section of the nearby state-protected area Reserva Nacional Villarrica–Hualafquén. After a takeover of a portion of the park taking place over a few weeks, an agreement between forest service CONAF and local Mapuche leaders was reached. The agreement, which stipulated a limited number of permitted agricultural and commercial activities, is renewed every five years. The claim over national park access was justified through different rationales. One of them was adverse possession, a principle used for the assignment of most public land in

56. Meza, "Mapuche Struggles."

57. Klubock, *La frontera*, 300; Di Giminianni and Fonck, *Emerging Landscapes of Private Conservation*, 312.

southern Chile to settlers in the early twentieth century. Earlier generations of Mapuche residents used pastureland within the park before its foundation in 1912, but they were denied ownership claims. The other rationale was their past and projected role of carers for this protected area. As a matter of fact, the claim did not involve logging permits, since claimants agreed on the need to preserve endangered native forests.⁵⁸ It focused instead on the removal of prohibitions against the customary summer transhumance, *veranada*, and permissions for commercial tourist activities such as guided tours within the park.⁵⁹

For many Mapuche landholders involved in the negotiation, the agreement legitimized their role as both traditional owners and custodians of the surrounding forests. The agreement with CONAF did not simply result in state indulgence toward agricultural practices; rather, it committed the Mapuche signatories to actively participate in the maintenance of the national park, including vigilance over potentially harmful tourists' actions, and maintenance of infrastructure. On one occasion, Mauricio, a resident from Currarehue who has recently embarked on a tourism project, explained that caring for the park also meant to ensure visitors' safe presence in it: "*Maleza* grows quickly around here—we need to keep an eye open if we don't want to lose this path." Caring for a protected area therefore implies to take care of paths in ways that visitors can enjoy their stay safely and respectfully. As for general attitudes toward forests, care is also functional to negotiation between distance and engagement.

While many Mapuche landholders continue to see preservationist discourses that tend to "cast any use as abuse"⁶⁰ as threats to their livelihoods, they have also embraced a particular version of conservation in which farming activities are not prohibited for the sake of untouched wilderness but are rather guided by Indigenous cosmological notions such as respect and thus turned into more sustainable practices. The intersection between conservation discourses and Indigenous reclamation became clear to me when I learned about educational projects designed to bring awareness about forest protection among school pupils around Currarehue. For the past few years Teresa has been organizing an environmental workshop (*taller medioambiental*) for school pupils parallel to her courses on Mapuche cosmology and language. One of the objectives of this environmental workshop was to foster interest among the local youth in the cultural and environmental significance of keystone species such as the araucaria monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*, *pewen* in Mapudungun). As a participatory activity this workshop also encompassed the participation of children in the park maintenance activities. On one occasion they were assigned the task of leaving wooden signs reminding visitors about environmental norms along one trail within the Villarrica national park.

58. The protected area around the Villarrica volcano includes two state properties. The homonymous national park was founded in 1940, and a surrounding area named Reserva Nacional Villarrica–Hualalafquén was established in 1912 with the name Reserva Forestal de Villarrica.

59. Di Giminiani, Fonck, and Perasso, "Can Natives Be Settlers?"

60. Cronon, "Trouble with Wilderness," 21.

Intersections between conservation and Indigenous reclamation do not simply dissolve conflicts over protected areas. They also show that conservation is more than an external force imposing new behaviors and socio-ecological relations. Conservation ideals and Mapuche cosmological principles at the core of cultural reclamation can be re-signified mutually. As proposed by Lorimer conservation can activate a set of embodied and skillful processes of “learning to be affected” by the environment.⁶¹ An affective model of conservation, as that emerging creatively from intersections with Mapuche projects for cultural reclamation, can be an alternative to dominant preservationist models resorting to trust in expert knowledge and central authority. It can also lead to emergent forms of care more attuned to local landholders’ aspirations and concerns.

Conclusion

This article began with two questions: When should one take care of nonhuman life? And when should we stop doing so? These questions bring to the fore the inherent ambivalence of caring as an action animated by human empathy and responsibility toward nonhuman life but also capable of instantiating new forms of domination and depletion. Inspired by experiences and understandings of care among Mapuche landholders, my answer to the two questions is that one should take care of nonhuman life when the vitality of nonhumans depends on our care, but one should stop when encountering refusals and recalcitrance. In caring, the autonomy of the other is also a matter of concern. At the cost of oversimplifying the shifting balance between the need for and refusal of care, I depicted two actions met by opposite responses: caring for crops and caring for forests. While engagement might represent the first relation, distancing seems a more appropriate descriptor for the latter. While no strict boundary can be said to exist between these two relational instances, their difference remains relevant inasmuch as they make the limits of care, both ontological and ethical, visible under the different terms of dependence and autonomy.

Later in this article I showed how care is not a direct reflection of entrenched cultural or ethical principles, as essentialist accounts of environmental engagements in Indigenous societies might lead us to believe. Care (*cuidado*) has emerged as an idiom helpful to many Mapuche landholders to discursively frame an environmental ethics stemming from intersections of Indigenous and conservation cosmologies. Emergent forms of care are the result of the resignification of existing farming practices as well as new actions articulated through the discursive and material means of conservation. The effects of care can only be indeterminate, since caring prompts us to foster an enchantment toward the singularity of nonhuman life and its ability to constantly surprise us. The mutual articulation between care and enchantment suggests that the latter is never a fleeting moment but a durable predisposition through which the carer continues to see the cared as a subject with unpredictable responses, including refusals and

61. Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*, 6.

vulnerability to our own care. For conservation to be a meaningful ethical mode of engagement with nonhuman life, it is necessary to understand care as always more than protection. As an act of relating, care prompts us at times to distance ourselves from nonhumans and others to actively arrange the relational conditions for their vitality to thrive. Care and enchantment find little space in radical rewilding and protectionist narratives. You might be surprised by unknown life encountered in a forest imagined as emptied of humans. But if we want to imagine a durable relation of coexistence under less depletive terms, it might also be worth reminding ourselves that being enchanted by those forms of life that we think we know should never cease to surprise us, as they remind us about the often-unsettling effects of our care.

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