Back to the land: museum practices, collections, and other-than-human politics in southern Chile

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Back to the Land: Museum Practices, Collections, and Other-Than-Human Politics in Southern Chile

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, Mapuche communities' participation has transformed the Mapuche Museum of Cañete. This participation shifted the institution's concept, curation, and conservation practices. From the second half of the 2010s onwards, other-than-human politics reshaped the participatory process. Demanding their release from the colonial captivity they were subjected to, other-than-humans challenged the conception of things-as-heritage, objects belonging to the Chilean State, and demanded de-patrimonialization, repatriation, and reburial. Making the recalcitrant image of things-as-lives apparent, other-than-humans required respect. They both stressed the museum practices that turned them into objects and brought to the fore the complexities of the colonial condition that encapsulate their lives. This paper is an ethnographic essay on what should not count as collection and how the Mapuche modes of existence exceed the Chilean heritage regime of objectification. Thus, it requires rethinking repatriation as other-than-human politics.

1 | Opening

During one of our workdays in the collections sector of the Mapuche Museum in Cañete, southern Chile,[1] Mónica Obreque and I discussed what she referred to as "the museum's territorial mandate." This expression describes the responsibilities assigned to the museum based on the territorial relations it involves. While it may relate to the Mapuche communities in the surrounding area, the concept extends beyond them to include the other-than-human politics reshaping the museum and calling for repatriation. This paper discusses the issues surrounding this mandate, arguing for repatriation as (1) an Indigenous cultural right that the State must acknowledge and facilitate, and (2) a result of politics that involve more than just humans. It provides an ethnographic critique of what is typically regarded as objects in collections and, consequently, who are the subjects and stakeholders involved in repatriation processes.

Thing is, here, a conceptual bridge, a border category between object and subject (Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), blurring and complicating the distinctions between these categories (Bennett 2010; Miller 2018). Mobilizing it allows for a description[2] of the *mogen* (lives) housed in the Mapuche Museum as its collection and acting over the museum's everyday life. Other-than-human is a term from de la Cadena (2010) that we will use here as a descriptor to point out relations of unknown and unforeseen constitutions. As the author says, other-than-humans can include animals, plants, and the landscape. We can add *things* to the list. However, its primary conceptual reach does not just encompass everything that is not human, as Latour's (2012) idea of no humans would. Instead, its scope lies in emphasizing relations with which the ontological distinctions between nature and culture, or subject and object, cannot keep up. Furthermore, it highlights how Indigenous movements in Latin America have made public conflicts between

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realities in which animals, plants, and the landscape cease to be just that. Therefore, the concept shatters certainties about who counts as participants in the political struggle for reality.

In line with that, this paper ethnographically explores how entities that are not just human make themselves present in the Mapuche Museum and what challenges they pose. Acknowledging and working with these presences is part of what its former director has identified as the museum's decolonization efforts (Paillalef 2017). Therefore, this paper aims to characterize repatriation as a form of politics transcending cultural differences as a human element. It seeks to complicate the understanding of what might be considered ethnographic or archeological objects, for example, to examine who the interested parties are in repatriation processes. However, it should not be seen as a general view of how every Mapuche person perceives museums, repatriation, or heritage practices. Such a broad statement is, in many ways, impossible.

In Chile, over a million people self-identify as Mapuche, most of whom live in the southern part of the country and in Santiago, the capital. They have long been part of significant public debates about the limits of Chilean citizenship and how the State handles diversity within its multicultural neoliberalism (Ayala 2020; Correa Cabrera 2021; Maldonado Ledezma 2012; Stüdemann 2018). Specifically, Mapuche movements for autonomy have accused the Chilean State of perpetuating and intensifying colonialism while attempting to erase the "Mapuche world." Leaders and intellectuals use this term to critically frame their demands and reflections, positioning "Mapuche culture" as an expression of multiculturalism appropriated by various sectors, from the State itself to transnational companies, to domesticate differences as mere matters of belief.

Instead, the arguments provided here are based on the reflections of individuals who, in their own way, have a deep concern for the Mapuche people and their reality as a nation. They are genuinely invested in the different activities carried out by organizations and communities to reclaim their lives and connection to the land. In this context, addressing heritage policies is just one of many areas of action, alongside initiatives such as linguistic revitalization, shamanic resurgence, land reclamation, reforestation, and the reorganization of ceremonial cycles, among others.

The following descriptions stem from the specific experiences of the staff at the Mapuche Museum. They have taught me how *things* themselves have impacted and required changes in their practices and comprehension of what the museum they work for is about. This paper describes the abrupt influence of *things*, *püllü* (spirits), and the dead in the museum's daily operations. As we will explore, their nature and precise identity are often unclear, nor do they need to be. For this paper's purposes, spirit is (1) a sufficient, enough-for-now term to refer to the vitality of *things*; (2) one of the components of *things*, constituting their intentions and politics; and (3) the *thing* itself existing in other worlds, what makes them people too (Maciel 2022).

While the widely accepted concept of agency could have been helpful, we chose to refer to how *things* and spirits act in terms of politics. This means recognizing their active and desired capacity to participate in shaping the "distribution of the sensible" and to engage in the struggle over what is deemed real (Rancière 2005, 2018), centering *things* as wanting (David-Ménard 2022).[3] As such, it highlights the significance of heritage as a site of ontological conflict (Blaser 2014; de la Cadena 2010; Harrison 2018; Lacerda 2021). In this context, repatriation is "giving things back to the land."

The paper begins by placing the Mapuche Museum in context, exploring its founding history and the recent process of engaging with the surrounding Mapuche communities. Next, it recounts a series of illnesses that transcend collaboration and focus on politics that exceed the human. It discusses the role of Mapuche shamanism in the museum and explains why certain *things* in the collection expressed a desire to leave, stating that they did "not want to be here [the museum] anymore." This revelation uncovers the colonial relationships concealed by heritage practices, especially concerning the Chilean State's control over Indigenous bodies, not only human ones. Instead, a multitude of connections between *things*, people, spirits, and the deceased emerge.

The third and fourth sections detail further the conditions around certain *things*: the relations between them and the spiritual owners or caregivers of territories, as well as the connections with the dead. While many other aspects could be examined, we have chosen these two because each highlights a different origin concerning the museum's collections. As we discuss these topics, we will address Mapuche protocols of respect and post-mortem, demonstrating how the process of patrimonialization impacts the Mapuche life cycles. Finally, it will discuss how Chilean legislation transforms things into State property. Trying to bypass national control over Indigenous bodies and *things*, this article will argue for the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples in Chile and beyond while advocating for a shift in our understanding of these rights to accommodate ontological pluralism.

2 | The Museum

Founded in the 1970s by the Chilean State, the Mapuche Museum was established to "pay tribute to Mapuche culture." Its collection was formed from purchases, donations from private collectors, and transfers from other public institutions. Initially named the Araucanian Folkloric Museum (Museo Folklórico Araucano),[4] its leadership changed in 2000 when Juana Paillalef, the first Mapuche person to head the institution, took charge. Upon her arrival, she began hiring staff of Mapuche origin to work alongside her. She allowed the institution to be permeated by Mapuche participation, something the previous administration refused to do. Paillalef invited communities, organizations, leaders, sages, and shamans to participate in the museum's renovation, which also encountered tensions and misunderstandings (Crow 2011; Stüdemann 2017, 2018).

The museum's initial efforts focused on renovating its physical structure, improving work methodologies, and updating its permanent exhibition. For example, it removed human remains from display. This approach resembled other experiences that recognized "community participation in the protection and promotion of cultural traditions [...] [as] the central axis of the concept of safeguard" (Gallois 2008, 34). Over the years, the museum engaged with communities through conversations across the territory, encouraging participation in the conception and

assembly of the new museum project (Martínez et al. 2005). The new permanent exhibition, conceived under the principle of *kvmepukintun* (widening the gaze, see Maciel 2022), was inaugurated in 2010. It aimed to convey a message from the Mapuche territory to all who visited (Paillalef 2017). However, the museum's commitment to participatory practices began encountering new challenges. Staff members said, "We illusorily thought that community participation alone would enable us to achieve our objectives or address underlying needs; however, we couldn't have been more mistaken" (Obreque Guirriman and Muñoz Perez 2020, 113).

In general terms, the process connects two elements identified by Henare (2005) as sources of tension for museums: (1) how collections were formed and the historical context of their acquisition by institutions, closely linked to imperial exchanges, and (2) the status of the things themselves, which can be viewed as either artifacts or Ancestors. The situation with the Mapuche Museum complicates this status insofar as the colonial formation of its collections has transformed *things* in unexpected ways. Rather than two separate sources of tension, we have one overarching issue, to which we must add another concern: how *things* are displayed and cared for daily.

The museum's previous efforts toward Mapuche participation and knowledge led to significant changes in its representation and exhibition practices, opening the door to unexpected dimensions and experiences. The transformation of the Araucanian Folkloric Museum into Ruka Kimvn Taiñ Volil (RKTV, meaning "the house of our roots' knowledge"), a name chosen by the communities, allowed new presences to make their way and shape the museum's daily life and concerns. The collaborative exhibition that resulted from this process assumed a localized, critical perspective on colonialism, exposing the duress faced by the Mapuche people while their land, bodies, and kin were aggressed and transformed into private property, raw materials, and disposable labor within the racial and colonial system (de la Cadena 2019; Escobar 2003; Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000). Focused on North American experiences, Lonetree (2009, 2012) indicates that telling the harsh realities of colonization through exhibition and other strategies is the heart of museum decolonization. Indeed, both as a final product and a curatorial and collaborative process, the exhibition was profoundly important. However, the staff in Cañete began to see these efforts as foundational steps in a more extensive and profound process. Since around 2015, other-than-human politics have transformed the museum, fundamentally altering its relationships with the collections and the understanding of what decolonization and Indigenization of the museum (sensu Phillips 2011) were about. This transformation was catalyzed as a result of the staff becoming seriously ill.

3 | Illnesses at the Museum

Between August and September 2019, I conducted an audience study commissioned by the RKTV board. Throughout this process, the museum's employees, collaborators, and I engaged in numerous discussions to better understand visitors' behavior while at the museum. During one of these conversations, Juana Paillalef, the former director, spoke about the exceptional work

done by another collaborator in repairing the pedestals used for displaying items. She mentioned that nothing was lost despite the museum's experience of a strong earthquake followed by months of intense aftershocks, and no pedestal had shifted from its base. Juana also remarked that this resilience was due to the work of the *genmapu*, the spiritual owners and caregivers of the territories,[5] stating, "They still listen to us, still care for us, even though this [RKTV] is an institution that has blocked the pathway of many dead, who must be returned to their graves and rest in peace."

Prompted by her reflection, I replied, "They [the *genmapu*] know that the employees are making an effort to ensure they can leave here and go wherever they need to. They also see that people always consider and respect them, asking for their well-being." I continued, "This is evident when we visit the exhibition windows and see the food staff provide for them..." Juana interrupted me, saying, "Yes, their offerings—our affection for them." From that moment, our conversation, which began with historical concerns regarding the participation of the Mapuche people and the staff's activities in the museum, shifted toward other-than-humans' involvement in the institution's daily practices.

Juana shared that a spiritual ceremony was performed in 2018, a year before our conversation. She invited a *machi*, a traditional healer or shaman, to lead the activity at RKTV. Throughout the night, the staff followed the *machi* as he moved across every room, warehouse, technical area, and external part of the museum. "We walked about ten kilometers here," she said. "We went up and down stairs, exploring every corner, from dusk until dawn." Juana emphasized that this was a necessary measure, stating that "What exists here [at RKTV] are not just objects; they are so much more than that."

On that occasion, Juana explained that RKTV and its staff have always been attentive to the demands of the Mapuche people. The museum's transformation over the past decade serves as an example of this commitment. The communities, leaders, and organizations collaborating with RKTV have redefined the institution, viewing it as a provider of cultural services. They requested workshops, utilized the ceremonial ground, and even sought refuge from the brutality of the Chilean army and police.[6] As a result, detailing all the transformations during the first fifteen years of collaborative work is challenging. We could characterize the resulting permanent exhibition as self-representation or participatory curation, as others have done before me (Canals Ossul 2017; Stüdemann 2017, 2018), connecting it to experiences elsewhere (Gomes 2012; Russi 2018). However, this characterization occludes a pragmatic aspect central to the Mapuche protocols. It brings a quick and undue association with (only) regimes of representation and identity that are not absent but coexist with others, which are equally important. Specifically, I am referring to the interventions that "the dead," as Juana puts it, along with other-than-human entities, exert on the concepts and practices that shape life at RKTV.

Most of the *things* listed as collections came to RKTV through two primary means. The first involves the silverware associated with the "economicide" (Chiwaikura 2021) that was

forced upon the Mapuche people following the territorial invasion by the Chilean army at the end of the nineteenth century. As a result of the colonial government's appropriation of land, the Mapuche families were forced onto small plots and stripped of the herds of animals they once owned. Many faced a prolonged period of severe hunger. In these circumstances of duress, many were compelled to hand over their possessions—particularly silverware—for food and seeds from grocers and pawnshops. Private collectors later acquired these items, subsequently selling or donating them to public and private museum collections.

Secondly, *things* ended up in museums due to the desecration of funerary and spiritual places. They were typically given to the *genmapu*, the spiritual owners and caregivers, as offerings and payments for materials. These offerings are often food, but giving items like ceramics or stone tools was common. According to Mónica, this indicates a "reciprocity with these places and the spiritual beings that inhabit them." As a result, various locations where the *genmapu* received offerings became targets for colonial looting and collecting. Once removed from these sites, *things* came into the possession of white middlemen. They entered private collections through the actions of these intermediaries, and eventually, some got to museums. Mónica pointed out that "the presence of these objects in the museum is a transgression of the sacred, ceremonial, and funerary spaces they originally belonged to."

The discussion about the origins of the collection and its connection to the plundering of spiritual beings prompted a reflection on the previously mentioned ceremony from 2018. Mónica explained that the *machi* went to the museum to see, as a shamanic ability, what was present there. As a result, the *machi* diagnosed that many spiritual beings were living in the museum. Some were linked to human remains, while others were not; many were attached to *things* and would not separate from them. As explained in another context, some *things* "brought the people who had gone [died] with them, to take care of them in the museum. We can say that the object brought the caregiver, its deceased, or its owner attached to it" (Obreque Guirriman and Muñoz Perez 2020, 111). "So," concluded Mónica, "we coexist with these spiritual beings here at the museum. They are not harmful, but they have ended up in this situation. After the *machitun* [the ceremony], I understood that many of them continued their journey while others remained here, albeit in a more peaceful state."

Easing the spirits and their pain was one of the reasons the staff called for the *machi*. Nevertheless, the ceremony resulted in a significant, unforeseen change in the staff's daily work. "Before the ceremony, we were all unwell. I was constantly sick, and nothing seemed to help. Additionally, our tempers improved significantly. We had never considered that [the circumstances lived in the museum] before. We naturalized this place merely as a workplace. Even if we knew we were Mapuche and acknowledged that we were in a different setting, we realized we had never had a *machi* ceremony, even after we started getting sick," Mónica shared.

A series of illnesses had impacted RKTV employees. Initially, they sought treatment at health clinics and through conventional medicine, but the results only provided temporary relief; the illnesses eventually returned. Although the idea of a ceremony in the museum had been proposed for years, a lack of funds prevented the staff from addressing the situation on their own. Then, one employee became seriously ill, and according to Mónica, this illness served as a signal from "the spirits and the forces living in the museum, urging action." These forces disrupted the museum's daily operations and made the need for a ceremony urgent. "The spirits made it happen for her [the seriously ill employee's] health. Otherwise, she could not have ended her labor life working at the museum," Mónica explained. By the *machi*'s mediation, the staff learned that the illnesses they were experiencing were derived from the very existence of the museum's collections, which included thousands of *things* and bodies of Mapuche origin, all categorized as Chilean national property and heritage.

Understood as representations of the "Mapuche culture" to which the museum paid homage, most *things* became part of the collections through a series of unequal exchanges, violent acts, and profoundly asymmetrical relations that shaped and continue to shape the colonial regime established over the Mapuche territory and lives. It refers to the inaugural genocide known as the Arauco War and the Pacification of Araucanía, during which colonial forces invaded Mapuche land, but also highlights its ongoing impacts and continuation. In other words, colonialism is not something that was done to the Mapuche world and, therefore, quickly relegated to the past. Such realization refuses the colonial regime of time that treats colonialism as a bygone issue. According to Samudzi (2020), chronology presents colonial violence as a thing of the past "because we are all now postcolonial," concealing the ongoing nature of the practices that continue to cause harm and remain in place.

The events at the Mapuche Museum illustrate that colonialism serves as the very infrastructure of everyday life, continuously reshaped to maintain the government of Indigenous land, bodies, and lives.[7] It is an everyday practice upon which the present conditions in Chile—and globally—take shape and, therefore, the infrastructure of the world in which museums also come to place. As a result of the insistence of other-than-humans and the staff's willingness to listen to their call, addressing the relations disrupted by collecting and musealization became a part of RKTV's reflective approach.

In such a context, other-than-humans are calling for reparation in face of the colonial disturbances that are the very condition of the collections' existence. *Things*, spirits, the dead themselves, and spiritual caregivers are the ones who acted—making employees ill—to change RKTV's ordinary life, prompting them to confront the "naturalization" of the museum, to recall Mónica's expression. In doing so, *things* began to demand a distinct set of practices aimed at maintaining the collection's existence in tension, challenging its foundations on a daily basis.

To some extent, other-than-humans have undermined the idea of the museum as just a vehicle for a collaborative, territorial message to emerge and come across, even if profoundly critical of colonialism. By forcing a change in everyday practices, they demanded the readjustment of colonial relations that continuously enable the existence of the collections and, by extension,

their very captivity within the museum. *Things*-as-objects come to coexist with the recalcitrant image of *things*-as-lives, *things*-as-stakeholders in the decolonization and Indigenization processes. As Mónica explained, this shift has happened because other-than-humans "no longer want to be here [in the museum]"; they want to be released from their colonial captivity (Maciel 2022). Mónica stated that this situation reflects a demand for Mapuche individuals working for the museum to do more than just "setting the pace, meeting goals, and other issues, such as monitoring temperature[. These activities] are important, but there are other important things that we need to do, and that comes from the fact we are Mapuche." To explore this further, let's examine two types of connections between *things* and spiritual beings: first, the relationship of owners as caregivers, and second, how they connect with the dead.

4 | Respecting the *Genmapu*

Many *things* in RKTV's collection demand "respect," a concept closely tied to Mapuche protocols that guide the best way to relate effectively to others (Course 2010; Di Giminiani 2022; Quidel Lincoleo 2020). Mónica explained to me that respect is "fundamental to life" and shapes how the Mapuche people should engage with all forms of life.[8] She stated that "all things have a spiritual being that takes care of them," emphasizing that nothing exists by itself. Every being has at least a spiritual owner who accompanies it (Pichinao Huenchuleo 2012). More straightforwardly, Juanita Pailallef wrote elsewhere that "all objects have a soul" (Paillalef 1998). In the Mapuche protocol, respect is acknowledging that others also have knowledge, experience, and family ties. This recognition extends beyond humans; it embodies a broader relational ethics. That is what Rosa Huenchulaf, former head of education and mediation at RKTV, taught me when I started working with her. She said, "All living beings need to be treated with respect. If so, they will not harm us. They will take care of us".

"Treating *things* with respect" became the *axis* for the museum practices developed in response to the illnesses experienced. Rosa emphasized that the ceremony led by the *machi* was crucial because it reminded the staff that RKTV is not only in the Mapuche land but also full of *mogen* (living beings) and "not just objects, as the Chilean State would like us to believe." According to her, the staff "forgot that as Mapuche, we need to respect the *mogen* who are here. We got sick to learn it, to remember that even here, we are still Mapuche." This realization became the metaphysical foundation for all the activities across the museum. For instance, its Education and Mediation Guidelines (2020–2024) stated that the area should guide practices toward acknowledging and caring for a collection that is alive, not in the metaphorical sense of social life (Appadurai 2008) or the cultural biography of things (Kopytoff 1986). To do so, the museum should draw from Mapuche knowledge, or *kimvn*, to illuminate the best way to proceed.

From this moment, it became more apparent that the museum staff's practices were not only meant to engage with *things* complying with Chilean regulations on heritage but also to respect them as *mogen*. The latter suggests challenging the objectification regime established by Chilean heritage legislation, tensioning it

by also acknowledging and guiding practices to allow the living dimension of *things* to emerge in everyday life. Or, to put it as Rosa said once, to take actions knowing that "even if we don't see them, spiritual beings are connected to everything we see," so that, like *che* (people), all other living beings also have *püllü* (spirits), and therefore are Mapuche relatives. This idea points out the so-called "special" or "spiritual bonds": the way spirits of humans and other-than-humans, such as *things* in museums, establish or can potentially establish kinship relations among themselves (Maciel 2022).

Sometimes, employees referred to spiritual beings as ancestors because they were connected to the ancient Mapuche people, the ancestors. They were also described as owners or caregivers, as the belongings in the museum are theirs, and they take care of these items. Additionally, they can be understood as spirits inherent to *things* themselves, because, as Rosa taught me, "they exist on the other side of them, where we cannot normally see." There are many ways to refer to these other-than-humans. Each of these ways highlights some of the various relations they engage in, pointing out many life forms that are not immediately visible but are associated with what is ordinarily perceptible. While their extent and forms are unknown for sure, their presence can be felt. This indeterminacy, that is, this lack of complete understanding, was never a matter of concern for the staff; it is not necessary to clearly define or explain who these spiritual beings are. On the contrary, the key point is to respect them even without fully knowing them. It is crucial here to recognize that the respect required by Mapuche protocols does not rest on identity or ontological stability. Instead, as some researchers argued, ontological stability arises precisely from respect (Bonelli 2012; Course 2011).

Respect was the main topic of Rosa Huenchulaf's reflections in front of the *metawe* (clay pitchers) glass cases during guided tours through RKTV's exhibition. She used to say that when a Mapuche person needs clay, they must enter the places of the *genmapu* (owners-caregivers of territories) with great respect and ask their permission to take small portions of the material. In addition to asking and making a request addressed to the spiritual being in question, the person must leave a little gift for them, "something to pay for" (*gijan*, buy) their generosity.

Many people used to bring a pitcher and hand it over to the owner-caregiver of what is sought. For this, it was necessary to beg, offer the pitcher, and bury it in the place where the clay would be removed. As Rosa explained, respecting owner-caregivers recognizes that "natural resources" are living beings. "The *rag* [clay] is alive and belongs to someone who made it grow and be there, so we must ask." The attitude of respect matters because what is taken (clay) and, consequently, who is asked for it (owner-caregiver of clay) also have lives of their own.

For an analogous reason, the things in RKTV collections receive their gifts. As said before, the employees not only fulfill all the requirements concerning Chilean heritage but they also carry out a series of daily practices connected to the Mapuche protocols of respect. During my days at the museum, I saw how the employees performed *pentukun* (salutation acknowledging the other as a subject), sang, talked, and petitioned things: activities they called *gijatu* (to beg). They also practiced multiple actions

that, arising from the communities' everyday life and traditional knowledge, relate to *things* as *mogen*, meaning, life forms that take part in the Mapuche world. However, during our conversations, what my colleagues emphasized the most was the gifts they offered to show respect. Two or three *pici metawe* (minor pitchers) with offerings are left inside the exhibition's cases, behind a piece, and on shelves or corners of the collections warehouse. The staff used to call it an "intercultural conservation protocol." At the same time, these practices disconcert and differ from those indicated by Chilean heritage legislation; they are combined and come to exist connected to them. While the gifts given to *things* maintain their living dimension, for these practices to be possible, the employees must also keep practicing *things* as objects of national heritage because their jobs as public servants depend on that.

5 | Things of the Dead

While teaching me how to be culturally polite, Rosa told me I should always bring small gifts to my host when visiting someone's home: something to eat and a bit of yerba mate. She explained that once the visit is over and visitors are about to leave, the host may give some of the shared food to bring home and that I should accept. *Rokin* is the name given to this act, and, according to Quidel Lincoleo (2021), it is "like a ritual [...] and a demonstration of affection [*cariño*]." The one offering the *rokin* not only seems to share the leftovers at the end of a visit but also shows that they care about the visitors having something to eat once they are home. However, the practice of *rokin* extends across different dimensions of Mapuche life and is crucial for ceremonies to be successful (Ñanculef Huaiquinao 2016): it shows respect between hosts and guests and cheers the spirits. *Rokintun*, the action of giving *rokin*, is also the name given when the relatives of someone who has just died bury them with their personal belongings. As Quidel Lincoleo (2021) explained, in the Mapuche world, death is frequently referred to as a journey, a transfer to other dimensions where life takes different forms, be it the sea (*lafken*), the volcano (*pijan mawiza*), or the pampas (*puelmapu*). Personal belongings are *rokin* that one must take with them to commute to the worlds of the dead.

Often removed from archaeological sites and excavations in ancestral burial grounds and cemeteries, *things* in the museum are also personal belongings and should have accompanied the journey of those who have died. José Quidel argued that digging up these *things* is a profound transgression. He emphasized the idea by recalling the expression *muntugekenun ta ba*: one must not despoil the dead. Museums often acquire items by claiming ownership of what has been taken from the dead, "what was removed from their journey," as Quidel stated. Consequently, museum collections of funerary origin directly conflict with Mapuche protocols. To recall Juana Paillalef's words, this conflict is one of the main characteristics of RKTV: it blocked the pathways of many dead people.

Quidel Lincoleo (2020) explains that the Mapuche person is complexly comprised of various interconnected elements. These include a more immediately visible bodily dimension (*kalvlgeyiñ*); the relations someone establishes with friends, relatives, and colleagues (*ragicegeyiñ*); their thinking and creativity (*rakizuamgeyiñ*); the *püllü* (spirits) that give them life (*püllügeyiñ*); and their *am*, a kind of spiritual double linked to a person's material presence. When someone dies, the *püllü* transitions to other dimensions, while their *am* lingers longer, caring for the buried body and personal belongings. In this context, as noted in other works (Cesarino 2011; Lea 2007), death reveals an extended personhood that, although disarticulated, maintains post-mortem connections that both spirits and humans should be attentive to and care for.

In one of our conversations, José Quidel explained that the *am* (spirit) demands the return of its belongings when others unearth and take them away from their burial site. As a result, the *am* manifests through dreams, visions, and illnesses that affect those who have wrongly claimed the deceased's personal belongings. If the rightful possession is not restored and the items are not buried alongside the deceased, the *am* will not find peace. It continues to seek its belongings, "demanding and claiming them."

Keeping the *things* of the dead alongside their bodies, buried together, maintains interrupted the relation of continuity between the material and immaterial aspects[9] that characterize the living person. If so, the spirit can continue its journey to upcoming lives. In the words of Quidel, "the spirit must take everything that made them a person on this land." If *things* are plundered, the person's double cannot find peace; it remains restless until those belongings are returned. This happens because the spirit's journey depends on reuniting and burying its material possessions, which must remain intact. Producing such gathering and burying of materials, followed by a spiritual separation from them, is what funerary services are all about (Course 2007). When these belongings are disturbed, the spirit's journey is interrupted, causing it to become lost; its transition to another existence is disrupted. Even if the person has been deceased for a long time, the spiritual double will return to reclaim and return what rightfully belonged to it.

When describing the Mapuche funeral service, Course (2007) suggests that the ceremony marks the completion and conclusion of the person as an interconnected complex. At this moment, relationships, possessions, spiritual aspects, and the deceased body are gathered, remembered, and the person is ceremonially decreed as terminated, allowing for their spiritual separation to happen. In line with this, I learned that a person's life is an ongoing process that ultimately concludes with death. Rosa explained that the *amvlpüllün*, a ceremonial speech in which spirits are told to depart, is the actual end of a person's life rather than the biological notion of death. During this discourse, people recount the individual's history, discussing who they were, what they accomplished, the significant events that shaped their journey, and their achievements. According to José Quidel, as already mentioned, once the funerary service takes place, the person transitions to another state of existence, in different dimensions. Their spirit prepares for the journey and starts to detach from the body. However, burying the person and their belongings provides stability to the dissociation. The burial is the conclusion and the element that maintains the detachment initiated by the funerary discourse in place. Therefore, it is necessary for the next lives to follow their course.

Digging up bodies and things revives the connections that the funerary discourse and services had terminated. The fact that the spirits of *things*, also referred to as their owners and caregivers, remain trapped within RKTV is a result of reactivating the relations that the funerary speech had ended, and the unearthing summoned back. If we describe the Mapuche person as a centrifugal force (Course, 2011b), like other Indigenous contexts (Costa 2017; Vilaça 2005), the ontological rupture caused by colonialism can impact their post-mortem state, transforming the individual into a centripetal force seeking to reclaim what rightfully belongs to them.

Employees at RKTV agree that spiritual parts are attached to *things* despoiled from burial areas. They also agree that they don't rest until they get their belongings back. Considering how things, caregivers, ancestors, and spirits, among others, demand their freedom, "to give things back to the land" is the horizon of pertinence organizing the staff's work and commitment.

6 | To Give Things Back to the Land

Historically associated with the monumentalization of European societies, museums are generally understood as preserving and reproducing historical memory, remarkable achievements, and knowledge related to civilizational progress (Clifford 2013; Delbourgo 2017; Stocking 1985). According to González Casanova (2021, 159), "There is a general agreement regarding the need of preserving heritage to ensure their transmission to future generations [...]," so the notion of conservation at stake aims to "save the continuity of something." In Latin American contexts, especially those ruled by over-patrimonializing states such as Chile, this mission is directly concerned with establishing and maintaining national narratives (Arthur 2015; Maciel 2018; Rufer 2018).

In 1987, the Chilean Supreme Decree n. 192 declared all collections in public museums, including the Mapuche Museum, to be "historical monuments". As stated in the first article of Law 17,288 of 1970, which legislates on the so-called National Monuments, these are State property and are formed, among other things, by the.

> objects of a historical or artistic nature; the burials, aborigines' cemeteries, or other human remains, the anthropo-archaeological, paleontological, or natural pieces or objects existing under or on the surface of the national territory or the underwater platform under its jurisdictional waters and whose conservation is of interest to history, art, or science [...]
>
> (Chile 2019)

The law is still the main piece of legislation concerning Chilean heritage, and it is well known for its rigid, State-centered understanding of the matter (Arthur and Ayala 2020; Schiappacasse 2021; Stüdemann 2018). It classified all Indigenous cemeteries, funerary-associated objects, and human remains as "National Monuments" and, therefore, as State property. If, on the one hand, this case recalls the performative dimension of law (Lixinski 2013), on the other, it places national property

and, consequently, State control and administration, above the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples (Arthur and Ayala 2020).

Attached to it is a reproductionist dimension that inherits the conception of *things* as connectors between different generations of people. In it, "museum objects are kept holding something of the past for present and future generations" (Henare 2005, 9). Assuming the task of protecting and conserving heritage, museums are thought of as connecting things and people over time and, as a result, shaping communities of heirs. In Chile, such a community is the nation itself, transformed into a group of commons mediated by collections, listed sites, and memories that the State must protect. This understanding occludes colonialism as the condition underpinning these connections and, thus, how much the formation of this community of heirs and Chilean nationalism depends on the appropriation and captivity of Mapuche and other Indigenous lands, *things*, and lives.

That is one of the reasons why critics of Chilean heritage by Mapuche intellectuals and communities often associate heritage with the maintenance of a colonial ontological siege over Mapuche existence (Obreque Guirriman and Muñoz Perez 2020; Paillalef 2017). As in other contexts (see Hicks 2020), the Chilean heritage legislation can be understood as an intricate loot technology that does not match the Mapuche life requirements and continues to enact the colonial regime. However, the problem unfolds into two main elements.

First, the State legislation does not recognize Indigenous people's autonomy in the matter. Even worse, it reaffirms the State's control over their bodies, cultural objects, ancestors, and land (such as cemeteries). Thus, when narrating the stories on how *things* have transformed RKTV to achieve their deserved rest, a process the staff has termed restitution and repatriation, the goal is also to highlight the urgency of acknowledging and respecting Indigenous cultural rights in the Chilean context. More explicitly, it calls for recognizing Indigenous rights to repatriation, ensuring Indigenous criteria as its guiding basis (United Nations 2007).

Secondly, RKTV's experience prompts reflection about repatriation's ontological dimensions. What else is there beyond the paradigm of cultural rights and regimes of cultural recognition? Recently, in a conversation with the Chilean National Monuments Council representatives, one of them summarized their understanding of the matter at hand here as "the Mapuche people want their cultural heritage back." As much as this statement recognizes Indigenous rights over patrimonialized *things*, it also produces a fundamental erasure. By translating the experience of RKTV in this way, using the terms of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition, the other-than-human politics driving the actions of the museum's staff gets lost. It is subsumed by the ontological determination that agents with political will are only humans. It could be said that recognizing it or not makes no difference if repatriation still takes place. However, this erasure eliminates what exceeds the mono-reality grounding heritage law and practices in Chile. By that, it cancels possibilities unfolding from such a plural reality and what Samudzi (2020, 1) calls a "grammar of futurity: not simply a world that does not exist, but one that could be fabricated through attempts to repair historical harm [...]".

After insisting to officials that this was not just a case of people wanting their heritage back and trying to reposition the other-than-human presence and politics, the staff met with disbelief. "Apart from what beliefs we may have," said the same officer, "heritage law does not recognize spirits. So, talking about it may seem naive." The latter is a term frequently used not only by Chilean officials to refer to the way Mapuche activists describe their demands but also by peers, such as anthropologists, archaeologists, and museologists, among others, to dismiss the ways RKTV's employees describe and refer to other-than-human politics pushing for repatriation and reburial. So, telling the stories of spirits and the dead demanding repatriation is a way to emphasize that other-than-humans are stakeholders in this, not by recognition, but as a matter of fact.

However, other-than-human politics also tells of an objectification process that has never completely ended. Even as museum collections, *things* keep demanding respect for their lives. The spirits, the dead, and their belongings require respect protocols. Under the colonial regime and its heritage government, *things* keep reminding people that collecting blocked the journey of the dead, as Juana said. Moreover, they do not intend to continue to be part of such colonial designation, as museum collections. Instead, they are claiming for their repatriation and reburial following Mapuche protocols. "We do not want to be here [in the museum] anymore," they said during the ceremony. And because they do not want to be there, the staff and their supporting communities are committed to pressing for their repatriation and reburial, releasing them from captivity.

"To give *things* back to the land," Rosa told me, needs to be done. It is necessary to keep pressing to give them rest, repatriating and redoing the funeral service so they can resume their journeys and return to where they belong. Acting is necessary even though the staff and their collaborators aren't sure what exactly giving things back to the land means—reburying anywhere, where each *thing* was taken from, in the museum? Should the return be performed with a conventional ceremony, or will a special one be required? There are still a lot of uncertainties. For now, they are aware that repatriating is urgent. That much was already asked of them by other-than-humans. However, Rosa told me that the decision on how to proceed would be up to the spirits, the dead, and caregivers to inform people whenever they are ready. And the staff, she said, will respect what they ask.

7 | Conclusion

This ethnographic account of the RKTV's transformation demonstrates that repatriation involves more than Indigenous cultural rights. It also needs to make room for acknowledging and engaging with an other-than-human politics in its own capacity. The experiences at Cañete reveal that *things*, spirits, and even the dead themselves actively demand their release from colonial captivity, thereby exposing the profound disruptions that collecting has caused over their lives and the relations they establish. What began as unexplained illnesses evolved into the realization that colonial heritage practices had disrupted relations between humans and other-than-humans, and that righting them would require recentering Mapuche protocols

and relational ethics even within the museum. These developments redefined the very idea of care and conservation for the Mapuche Museum: instead of simply safeguarding objects as State property, the museum's role expanded to encompass kinship, spirituality, healing, and enabling the dead to reclaim their journeys and the collections to be rightfully repositioned as *mogen*. As a result, daily practices were transformed, reflecting both the Mapuche knowledge and Chilean requirements regarding heritage practices.

RKTV's experience highlights the importance of Indigenous authority over the well-being of Indigenous lives and the care protocols designed for them. Conservation, in this broader sense, becomes a form of complex stewardship: caring for collections as one would care for a relative, attending to their needs through Indigenous protocols and knowledge channels. This also requires understanding and accepting that repatriation or reburial might be the most appropriate form of care in some situations. Museums, especially those led by non-Indigenous staff and administration, must adopt an ethically responsive approach that, while acknowledging the legal frameworks they operate within, delegates authority over defining procedures to Indigenous peoples. Or, at least, create room for a plurality of practices within their daily operations, guided and resulting from conversations and learning from Indigenous peoples. They must recognize that preserving a collection may continue colonial injury. Therefore, the focus should shift to healing and creating conditions for Indigenous lives to recover from colonial harm, nurturing kin networks that connect humans and other-than-humans. As demonstrated in the case of RKTV, nurturing these connections can also mean, quite inclusively, letting them go.

As a result, the sequence of events discussed in this paper has practical implications that extend far beyond the Mapuche Museum. First, it would be essential for museums to find room to work with other-than-human politics in their everyday operations. Nevertheless, such a process will not be possible within the many layers of objectification that conceal and render Indigenous realities invisible within museums. This means acknowledging, allowing, and engaging with collections, opening the possibility that they may be more than what museum practitioners and conservators assume or think they know them to be: objects, specimens, and the like.

This leads to a second fundamental shift: moving from punctual or instrumental consultations to ongoing, frequent, and respectful co-learning partnerships. Instead of seeking Indigenous perspectives only during self-interested moments, like assembling an exhibit, museums should work to build long-term relationships of trust and shared authority over everyday operations. This could include, for instance, establishing permanent Indigenous advisory boards with decision-making capacity and community-led research into collections. If something is abundantly clear about the RKTV's process, it is that collaboration is not a checklist item but a continuous process of listening, humility, tuning the senses, and learning that can fundamentally reshape and improve institutional culture, both for staff, communities, and *things*. If the reach, content, and aim of a collaboration are already decided beforehand, and it does not create unsettling situations or reconfiguration of practices, then it is not truly a collaboration.

Crucially, none of these implications should be seen as rigid rules or universal policies. Instead, they serve as open-ended invitations to reevaluate museum practices by considering multiple realities. All change museums implement must stay adaptable enough to permit lines of flight, meaning a way for museum work to continually break free from its own constraints and practices vis-à-vis further collaborations. The reason for that relies on pluriversality itself: what works in one setting or for certain Indigenous needs might not be suitable in another. Indeed, RKTV's experience is also about expecting the unexpected. When other-than-humans are acknowledged as legitimate participants, the consequences are not so easily foreseen precisely because they exceed human decisions. Embracing Indigenous realities and creating alliances with them to heal colonial damage means that museum professionals must remain humble and adaptable, willing to cede the comfort of absolute expertise and work through the discomfort. Instead of relying on disciplinary knowledge for certainty, it is essential to trust Indigenous protocols as a generative ground for appropriate knowledge aimed at caring for their ancestors, spirits, and *things*. It means accepting that relational ethics may guide practices in ways that standard museum training cannot anticipate. As such, certainty comes not from expertise, but from trusting partnerships and Indigenous guidance.

Finally, this ethnographic essay is essentially a call to shift authority and control over museum collections and practices to Indigenous peoples, an idea already emphasized by Indigenous scholars and museologists (e.g., Bell 2023). As Gray (2022) has argued for rematriation, the processes mentioned here are not just about returning objects, but also about enabling reconnections and land-remaking by respecting Indigenous protocols, laws, and spiritual relationships. Therefore, it is transforming museums into significant caretakers: it is an invitation for museums to become partners and facilitators of community-led care and reality-making, where other-than-humans have much to contribute. This is a lesson other experiences can learn from the sequence of events at the Mapuche Museum.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

[1] Of public nature, the museum collections are designated as State property according to Chilean heritage legislation, and the institution is managed by the National Cultural Heritage Service (Servicio Nacional del Patrimonio Cultural).

[2] Description is here understood as an anthropological tool. Therefore, it does not concern a preliminary stage preceding analysis nor is it a neutral act of recording, apart from argumentation. Instead, it is a central epistemological and methodological gesture that *does* conceptual work. As Strathern (1990, 2020) has argued, description corresponds to inherently analytical act of rethinking: in her writing, to describe is to generate relations, to attend to form, and to allow the ethnographic material to "think" through its own logics. Rather than clarifying or simplifying, anthropological descriptions are aimed at complexifying what we assume we know; it may even resist resolution. Lebner (Lebner 2017) explores this at length, showing how description is not a step toward theory but a mode of theorizing itself. This approach invites attention to specificity, context, and the internal dynamics of a given world, rather than fitting it into preexisting analytical schemas. For museum and heritage scholarship, this might suggest a way of engaging with collections, practices, or publics that foregrounds entanglement over explanation.

[3] See Hicks (2020) and Cesarino (2017) for two different critics to agency theory in material culture studies and anthropology of art.

[4] Araucanian is a racist term used to refer to Mapuche people.

[5] The *genmapu* are more frequently described as guardian spirits of specific domains and territories (Huenchulaf Cayuqueo and Obreque Guirrimán 2022; Pichinao Huenchuleo 2012).

[6] At different times, Mapuche protesters entered the Museum's terrain to seek asylum and cross over during open conflicts with Carabineros de Chile, the national police, and the army.

[7] See Tuck and Yang (2012) for a similar discussion, but from a different perspective and context.

[8] The idea of life here does not rely on any biological principle to separate living and non-living beings (Maciel 2022; Pichinao Huenchuleo 2012; Povinelli 2016).

[9] Precisely, between material (body, belongings) and not so immediately material (spirits, doubles, kinship) elements.

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