

Senses of Painful Experience  
*Memory of the Mapuche People  
in Violent Times*

ANA RAMOS

The “Conquest of the Desert” is the official tale about the formation of the Argentine nation-state, in which the violent invasion of indigenous territory acquires a narrative place as a heroic and foundational deed. An event built on silences more than images of the past, the temporality of the Conquest of the Desert seems to encompass only the narrow timeframe during which certain “battles” took place and “the last caciques surrendered.” In the memory of the Mapuche people, this event (described as a genocide) brings together other social experiences, produces other silences, and generates other images of the past. But the political potential of Mapuche narratives does not lie solely in the description of the painful and the unspeakable—such as physical torture, forced confinement, hunger and misery, rape, and the death of children—but also in the implicit complaints, agency orientations, and presuppositions within the epistemic frameworks of the past. Different temporalities, historical agents, and significant events structure the poetic forms with which the memory organizes the sensory world. Through the *nütram*, they take on Mapuche meanings and experiences of the past and the present. This chapter is an analysis of the events of the Conquest of the Desert from the viewpoint of Mapuche memory, which, since those critical events, has focused on restoring and rebuilding the people.

## Ancient Conversations (*Nütramkam*)

“The actual history isn’t told by the books”

(MAURICIO FERMÍN · an elderly Mapuche of the Lof Vuelta del Río)

As has been repeatedly said, every people narrate their stories, but only those texts that meet the epistemic criteria and ontological frameworks of state hegemonies become “real” (Blaser 2013; de la Cadena 2015). This has happened to stories about the so-called Conquest of the Desert; official texts and the dominant imaginary have transformed the conquest into one of the central, epic events that founded the Argentine nation-state. Nevertheless, to the Mapuche people, these events are remembered as years in which “the forces of nature stopped being in tune with the earth,” the years of the “great killing,” and the moment in which “words became lies,” the land was fenced, and “nature decided to stop speaking.”

The Mapuche people record their ancient conversations—with fathers, mothers, grandparents or other relatives, and community members—about those decades of violence between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in oral and collective texts called *nütram*.<sup>1</sup> By identifying a story as a *nütram*, the narrator conveys that the experiences that are being told therein must be understood as what really happened in the past, as the lived experiences that the protagonist chooses to tell, in order to preserve them in the memory of future generations and as a trace to be followed so that history may carry on in its course.<sup>2</sup> This character of truth, of retelling and the teaching of important lessons, is what has made the *nütram* one of the most performative genres in the struggles, claims, and political projects of the Mapuche people. With the purpose of understanding the meanings that these experiences of pain have in social memory, I now turn to contextualizing the historical production of the *nütram* as well as their transmission at the core of the Mapuche people.

### The Silence That Speaks Memory

Army ambushes; the years in which the Mapuche were pursued and forced to hide in the Andean cordillera; the distances they were forced to walk, rounded up like animals; the children who witnessed the killings; the tortured women; the

hunger in the concentration camps; the forced relocations as enslaved laborers and the irreversible separation of families; children who would never be seen again; the lost children who would never know who their parents were; the elderly who were left alone and forgotten; the piles of dead bodies—these are just some of the painful images from that past. Yet, these are not often reproduced in explicit or detailed narratives; rather, they have been retransmitted as memory each time in the *nütram*, without the need to transform them into direct speech.

In many *nütram*, the validity and performative force of these painful experiences are embodied by narrators and audience through silences, or what is being presupposed or implied. As we will see in the next section, certain phrases such as “my grandmother knew how to cry” (“sabía llorar mi abuelita”), “at the time of the killing” (“en el tiempo de la matanza”), or “when I was a prisoner” (“cuando estaba prisionera”) bring images of violence into the present without the need to replay every detail. I present these images as some of my interlocutors retold them. Just like me, they did not always know how to fill in the significant gaps that contextualized certain *nütram* as “sad stories” (“historias tristes”). The fragments that I transcribe below are some of the historical explanations that my interlocutors would give before or after executing a *nütram* so that I could interpret the stories they told. The moments in which these brief references to violence enter the narrative of a *nütram* are often meant to indexicalize the context that must be presupposed in order to interpret the significance of the events that are being told.<sup>3</sup>

That elderly woman used to say that the Indians were taken rounded up like a *tropilla* [troop of horses or cattle]. Do you know what they did to the woman who got tired? They hid in the *vizcachá's* [South American rodent] cave because they would cut off their breasts and left them like that. . . . To me, that's a horrible thing. And the men who got tired, they grabbed them and left them staked into the ground. (Valentina Nahuelquir, Cushamen, 1998)

They grabbed the little ones and left them skewered as if they were grilled meat and left them planted like that. When they saw all those things happening, many *longkos* [chiefs] gathered and set up a date for a reunion so they could escape all together through the Andes Mountains, because the invaders were too many and they were all armed. (José Ñanco, Llafenco, 2001)

My grandfather went missing during the war; they say he was three years old at the time. They killed his father and mother when they were running away through the Andes Mountains so he ends up by himself. He was covered in the knitted blankets they used for the horse saddle [matrones] crying in some mountain path when a woman who was fleeing from the army found him and raised him. (Carmen Calfupan, *Vuelta del Río*, 2003)

My late grandmother ran away from the place where she was imprisoned and came back here, to her place. She knew how to keep a conversation going and she knew how to cry, and I knew how to pay attention. My grandmother knew how to cry when she remembered. They took her but she ran away. She used to tell how they were rounded up like a tropilla, with all their animals, but they were no longer the owners of those animals; they [the Argentine army] would not even give a piece of meat to the [previous] owners of those animals, only they ate the ones that were being rounded up. They were like animals. And they say they were rationing the food only to survive until they arrived at the place where they all would be finished. As for the ones who couldn't walk any longer, they say they would cut their throats just like that. They would round them up so they didn't escape. They took them far, they said they could see women who had children getting sick, and others getting their throats cut. Only one biscuit per week my grandmother said they gave them. . . . My poor grandmother knew how to cry. (Agustín Sánchez, *Futa Huao*, 2004)

There were many siblings; some fled through the Andean cordillera. But my grandmother and another couldn't follow them. There, where they kept them imprisoned was my grandmother. They say people would starve to death. There was a small hill where they used to throw the dead ones, and there they would burn them. She said they would starve to death there. My grandmother used to say that those who were kept captive and later died would be thrown on the hill, and when many of them were there, they say they would burn them. (Ana Prane, Prane community, 2006)

My late grandmother on my mother's side died at 130 years old. She had been kept captive when they came to fight the Mapuche and the Tehuelche. They took all those people; they grabbed them and took them. Those who weren't killed they took alive. My grandmother was young when they took her, with her mother and an uncle. My grandmother used to remember every bad treatment they had to go through. They took her to Buenos Aires, there they were taken. She used to tell me at night, she told me and knew how to cry, my grandma, I wasn't in any condition to hear all that, what she told me. (Enrique Cárcamo, Futa Huao, 2006)

I ran away, my grandmother used to say, she knew how to tell me. She had come from where they were locked down. There, they used to take the children, they took all the children. And she says that her mother, when they [the soldiers] would want to take her, would sit and remain there sitting, and hid her under her *quipan* (Mapuche garment). They couldn't take her, not even by force, nothing, and she stayed there, that's it, and under her skirt she said she was put. And that is how she says she was saved and could run away. But her father and the others were taken, they were all taken away. My grandmother used to know how to tell that in language. . . . I knew how to pay attention. . . . She knew how to cry, my grandmother, poor [thing]. . . . She is at the cemetery, up there, my grandmother. (Catalina Antilef, Futa Huao, 2006)

They used to count people's deaths; they say that they would cut the indigenous people's [paisanos'] throats, men and women. And they also say that they hid, so the killers would pass them by, they buried themselves; they made caves so that they couldn't be seen. So, like that, some young boy sometimes could be saved, poor people, how much have they had to suffer. (Florentino Llanquetrúz, Blancuntre, 2008)

My grandmother went fleeing from La Pampa, she fled from there. She had a large family; she had sisters, brothers, father, and mother. But, it came that time when they would do the killing in the place where they had their tents. The army arrived with the priest at the tents and

they killed the whole family. All of her sisters and brothers. My grandmother was the eldest and she fled in the night with the youngest one, whom I got the chance of meeting. My grandmother tells that the priests raped her other sisters; they cut off their entire breast, killed her mother. Her only family was her sister, the one she saved, my grandmother, as a child. (Manuela Tomas, Puerto Madryn, 2008)

Within the intimacy of their kitchens, the Mapuche have told those experiences to one another; first they told them to others who were part of those violent events, and today they tell them to their sons, daughters, and grandchildren. In those private moments, the *nütram* began to take shape; they went by the name of “sad stories,” whose memories made the eldest ones cry the most. Each *nütram* narrator is the guardian of one very specific image; one that results from the particular perspective of the ancestor who, as a child or young adult, spoke about the suffering of their people during those decades from their point of view. That is the reason why Mapuche thinkers often maintain that memory is like a river whose force depends on the conjunction of many memories. To the members of the Mapuche people, each one of these fragments has the sense of the whole and proves the existence of a purposeful political policy of genocide designed explicitly to exterminate their people (see Delrio and Pérez’s chapter in this volume). As the elderly man Florentino Llanquetrúz explained in his own words: “Those were the years of the *winka* [non-Mapuche people] decree of killing indigenous people; they took them, they threw them (like it’s done with *boleadoras*). . . . I don’t know how it was before that government decree of killing people” (Blancuntre, 2008).

But these fragments of memory not only entangle in a horizontal way, combining different experiences of people who lived pain in similar ways; in the same kitchens where some tell and others listen, the unity of the text also entangles in a vertical way between different generations and through time (Delrio and Ramos 2011). During the first three decades of the twentieth century, many of the Mapuche found some place—in the less productive lands that remained “open fields” after more fertile land was redistributed to private or state hands—where, as the *nütram* often express, they could “live quiet.” Nevertheless, many communities and dispersed inhabitants could not find that quiet way of living that they yearned for. New contexts of violence began in the 1930s, generated by elite interests in those few lands where the Mapuche and

Tehuelche were reorganizing their lives: violent evictions, in which invaders would burn their houses and belongings and abduct entire families in trucks just to leave them in other places; security forces operations, such as those of the *gendarmería* (border police), who actively sought opportunities to torture Mapuche people; arbitrary legislation that benefited those who wanted to evict indigenous families from their land; homicides that went unpunished; and many other humiliating policies, all of which continue today.

They came from there and they used to run after the indigenous people [paisanos]; the border patrol arrived in the year 1939 or so, and there they began to take the people away, by foot they took them, all the indigenous people off to work, they took them by whipping them, or beating them up. I have this as an experience; I was already nine years old in the year 1940. (Carmen Jones, *Vuelta del Río*, 2006)

They burned all the animals, the whole house down, and that is how they took us away. They killed the people there, those who had children; [they] took them away from their parents and sent them away to do some labor, and killed them by flogging them. . . . I was little, how could I know. But I saw how my father fought with a border patrol man and how they took him away . . . and all of his horses, and even a blanket [*matra*] that my mother herself had made, and they took it all away. I was pressed tight to my father's legs, oh, how I cried. I clutched to his legs. (Margarita Burgos, *Futa Huao*, 2006)

In the chains of transmission of these experiences, the images of violence at the end of the nineteenth century overlap with the new generation's own experiences. And within this flow, the violence became the main topic of the *nütram*, even in its expression through silence. These fragments are a product of the excavation of silences and the recovery of speech, but in order to understand how experiences of terror are felt and understood, the work of memory also invites us to think about this in the opposite way, through silences that are still immersed in Mapuche subjectivities. Silences, just like speech, are cultural and political, affective creations with very specific and local significances. In other words, they are produced within a particular frame, with certain listeners and tellers "in the ears" or the mind (Dwyer 2009). In the same argumentative line that Leslie Dwyer has proposed, I sustain that if those most painful

fragments were mostly produced as silences, it has to do with the fact that the Mapuche people have tried to give social existence to those painful memories or repressed memories in order to elude the treacherous realm of speech and dominant narratives about “what really happened,” and the subordinated memory about the history of the state.

The way in which the *nütram* have given existence to a socioculturally significant memory for the Mapuche people consists of displacing “interior pain”; reorganizing the saddest experiences from the past; and placing their own agencies at the forefront in the making of history, Mapuche knowledge, and the binding commitments between people, ancestors, and forces of nature.

### Keep Rising (*Seguir Levantándose*)

The *nütram* about the years of violence tell “how, despite adversity, the Mapuche did what nobody believed they could do: survive and later reconstruct themselves as a people.”<sup>4</sup> But, in addition to this, they also throw into relief those aspects of Mapuche knowledge that allow them to interpret this reconstruction as a result of alliances between human and nonhuman agents. Agreeing with Jonathan Hill, I view the struggles of indigenous groups to reappropriate their power over their past after demographic collapse, colonial domination, and other ways of removing their power as involving the challenge of “poetically constructing a shared understanding of the historical past that enables them to understand their present conditions as the result of their own ways of making history” (1992, 811). Seen from this angle, the *nütram* are a way of making history. However, they are also the stories that, in reorganizing sensory experiences, creatively perform the longed-for world of the ancestors in the present.

As narrated by the survivors, the *nütram* forefront the return to their places, the reencounter with their loved ones, and the intervention of natural forces who guided their return. In this sense, these narratives were invested with advice about how to continue resisting and repairing the threatened world. The “sad stories,” then, identify a group of tales that were culturally invested with authority because of their images and knowledge of the past, which were sustained in the poetic and ritual practice of narrating them again and again.

Belarmina Nahuelquir, from Cushamen Mapuche community, remembered a *nütram* her grandparents had told her:



As a child I was raised with my grandparents, Siberio Huenchunao and Josefa Huenchueque, and when we were hand in hand I would listen to everything they said when they would start their conversations. Once, a conversation about a woman who was once a prisoner, captured by those who killed indigenous people, came up. They say she ran away from that prison and she came here crossing the fields and hills. They say that, at the beginning the lady was lost, she did not know where her relatives were, and she was very hungry. They said that the *tapiñen*<sup>5</sup> appeared to her, which is the lion, and stayed by her side, staring at her. Then, the lady got frightened, found a tall tree, and climbed it. From the top she performed the *tayil* [song]<sup>6</sup> for the lion. So, the *tapiñen*, as she was singing to him [*tayilequeaba*], started to cry; he would clean his tears from his eyes with his hands. When she was done performing that *rogativa* [ceremony], she descended from the tree, and they say the lady carried on with her journey. The *tapiñen* was guiding her, indicating to her where she would have to go next. When she was at the halfway point of her path, when she already had advanced enough, they say that some *guanacos* [a camelid native to the pampas] were coming, and they say that when they passed nearby, the lion killed one of them close to her. The lady grabbed it and took its meat so that she could eat. The *tapiñen* left her. And the lady continued with her journey; she was no longer afraid. She kept going. That is why grandpa says that there is no use in displeasing an animal like that, because he is not bad; you better leave him alone and then do a *rogativa* for him, just like that lady did. The lady arrived at her home, and when she did she found her relatives. My grandfather used to tell many things, what happened before with the people, what it was that they would do. (Personal conversation, 2011)

In different places, people remembered stories similar to the one that Belarmina told, in which a tiger, a lion, a puma, a *ñanco* (small eagle), or another being from nature guided an ancestor through the journey back home, when he or she would be escaping from the killings or the concentration camps where indigenous people had been prisoners.

Other stories tell how environmental forces acted to restore the world that had been destroyed. For example, some groups of displaced families—joined together because they were running away from the army or because they were

searching for a place to rest and “live peacefully”—would welcome natural forces as entities representing their ancestors, or received from the stars a command to hold a ceremony (*kamaruco*) and constitute themselves as a new group of belonging and identity. Prudencio Tramaleo, from the Mapuche community of Loma Redonda, says that the *kamaruco* that they hold annually began in the north, when they were returning from “the war that was happening with those that took and killed people.” Many families were returning, putting up encampments:

“Tolderías [encampments] they would call them.” My grandfather spoke about that story that there is. One day, he says, when they were starting to take down the *toldería* so they could move to other place, a girl who was there playing all of a sudden looked up. They stood there watching and saw something coming down the sky, which went directly to her heart. Then, the girl stood up. My grandfather asked: “What happened to you?” and she replied: “It seems that a star came into my heart.” She was eight or ten years old at that time. . . . Those who were camping kept going, searching for a place to live quietly. More than ten years they kept going. When the girl was twenty years old she began to cry. The girl cried. Then they arrived at a valley and lit a fire. The girl kept crying. So they did a *tayil* [song/*tayilquearon*] for three days. After the third day the girl got lost. They searched for her; they did a *purrun* (ceremonial dance). They were about to leave when, on the fourth day, when the sun was coming up, they heard the cry of the girl from the top of a hill, a tall hill that was there. That girl was sent to teach them how to do the *kamaruco*. . . . Later the girl explained, “I was caught so I could have a conversation with you about giving advice, then I will get lost by myself again, and you won’t see me again.” The last advice she gave them was that they never . . . never try to forget. That is the only thing she said. (Personal conversation, 2006)

In a similar sense, Martiniano Nahuelquir tells about the time when the families who were running away with his grandfather Fernando Nahuelquir through the Andes saw their ancestors doing a *kamaruco* on top of a hill. Warned in his dreams, Fernando knew that at that moment, they were being named as a new group of belonging, and those circles of people whom they saw on that hill was a *kamaruco* that they must not forget.

The intervention of environmental forces that communicate how to regenerate bonds and restore indigenous ways of inhabiting the world is also remembered by Mauricio Fermín, from the Mapuche-Tehuelche community of Vuelta del Río. This elderly man narrates the path of return of a grandmother who managed to escape from a concentration camp in Buenos Aires where she was held prisoner with other women and children. She said that not only were they always hungry there but they were also forced to work from sunup to sundown producing flour. One night she decided to hide under a pile of dead people who had been thrown into a gorge and managed to escape the guard, starting her return journey at daybreak. After avoiding different obstacles, she found other families that were returning from other places. One of the women with whom she shared the encampment one day was surprised by her partner when she was boiling a child so she could “have something to eat”:

And she says that one day the men went out searching for ostriches and guanacos for two days testing their luck. When they came back, a man went to see his wife. He was shocked when he saw that she was boiling a kid in a pan. . . . The man got angry and wanted to grab the lady, but she fled running. . . . She says that she saw a rainbow falling over the ones who knew how to dig up the land, and who were digging the land up. She says that the earth opened up and that she descended on a cable. She remained under the land. Six months was she lost; after six months they let her come up once again. They say she brought some wheat seeds, peas, broad beans . . . she carried everything on her head. She says that they told her down there under the earth, the people from down below, that they told her she had to sow everything. “Now you’ll have something to eat.” And all of a sudden the lady appeared to the man. They say the man had great joy. After all that suffering because he couldn’t find her. She says that he asked where she had gone, and that she said she had been under the earth. They say she came after the war, just walking . . . she says that the woman had gone through a lot of misery. Then the woman told that under the earth, there were many rich people who have myriad farms. We are above those people from down below, and that woman saw all those people who lived there. The man was very happy when the woman appeared to him. I remember that my grandmother told me all this. (Personal conversation, 2005)

Some of the other *nütram* tell about the “sad stories” that point out the mistakes or bad decisions that some people made. In those cases, the experience being transmitted aims to prevent those who hear it from similarly taking a wrong path. For example, María Huilinao, from the Mapuche community of Vuelta del Río, remembered one night in which her grandmother began to have a conversation with her about how she arrived at their community:

“I suffered a great deal,” she says to me, because she fled with “mom and the other little sister who died of hunger along the way,” she says. She says that they were camping there over three months, eating the very little they carried; they made *ñaco* [toasted flour]. During the winter they stayed camping, and they went through the ugliest times. . . . And a family who was also returning joined them, she says. So, then they became two families, she says, that came together, keeping each other company. She says that they butchered a *chulengo* [baby guanaco] to survive the winter. . . . But the other family who was with them said that they were tired of eating meat, that they wouldn’t eat it, and threw it away . . . so then, they didn’t have anything left to eat. She says that she said: “Go for a walk over that hill, maybe there may be some *chulengos* and you could grab one,” she says that she said. And they went . . . the boys that were with them went there . . . and they said they didn’t find anything. Grandmother says that she told them, “Well, you made a mistake,” she says that she said using the Mapuche language; “Tomorrow we will wake up early, at five in the morning, and we will rise and do a *nguillantun* [rogation]. Because they messed with the other family, now we all have to pay, suffer hunger in an equal way, here.” So the next day they woke up to do the rogation in the morning. Later, they stayed awake, and about nine in the morning, they say they looked ahead and on a hill near them a troop of guanacos were visible. And at that moment, she says she told them, “The guanacos are coming, we must go to hunt them.” They went, she says. They went, and she says that she did the *nguillantun* so that they would catch a guanaco so that they could eat. . . . How quickly they grabbed them! They had a few days of hunger because at those times some mistakes were still made, because they were people who walked and threw food away. And that is what my late grandmother told me. She told me: “And this that I am

telling you is true, because I went through that. I went through all that," she says to me, "I suffered a great deal," she says to me. "I suffered. . . . To this day I still get sad when I remember that." (Personal conversation, 2004)

In a 2011 conversation, Belarmina Nahuelquir explained to me that in those years of the killings the women had to hide their children under their clothes, because if they didn't the *winka* (white invaders) would find them and take them far away. One *nütram* tells the story of some families who were running away from the *winka*; because they were tired from walking so much, they decided to get some rest. Then, a young girl came running; she was also fleeing and warned them that the *winka* were coming. After giving them the warning, the young girl continued her journey, crossing the open field. But nobody paid her any attention. They all remained seated, resting when "those *winka* who removed children from their mother arrived. . . . Not even one single boy they left." When the *nütram* finishes, Belarmina's grandfather highlighted the fact that the young girl was telling the truth and that the families at first did not believe her, and reminded Belarmina that she always had to trust advice and warnings from her people. In this historical yet synthesized tale, the mistake that was made is also what builds up knowledge about how to carry on the course of history.

The Mapuche with whom I spoke often named the stories about the experiences suffered during the years of genocide "sad stories." However, in those "sad stories," painful experiences are often presupposed in a narrative plot focused on return. "Return" is understood in multiple dimensions: as a return to a place where they could live quietly, as a restoring of affective bonds and ties of belonging, and as a restoration of dislocated knowledge. Return always implies a context of death and violence at the beginning, but the *nütram* mention this violence only briefly, or silence or presuppose it, in order to emphasize the restoration of the destroyed people. This does not imply that Mapuche do not remember the pain and suffering—they even cry sometimes when they are narrating those events—but the Mapuche have chosen to transmit those memories by narrating them as historical events of how they managed to survive. The *nütram* transmit to future generations the importance of remaining together, of never forgetting their ways of interacting with nature, and, as a Mapuche activist would say, of rising once again as a people despite such adversity.

As Janet Carsten (2007) maintains, by returning to the notion of a *critical event* (Das 1995), these contexts of violence invaded personal and family life, destroyed social and cultural links, and interrupted the transmission of knowledge. Nevertheless, during and after those critical events, new ways of remembering emerged to express the pain and dispositions toward the past, the present, and the future, with enough political potential to inspire projects of restoration.

### The Nonevent of “Conquest of the Desert”

However, despite its purpose as a story of truth, the *nütram* was displaced from national discursive formations about the past and genres authenticated by historical science and the state. With this displacement, silences were produced, and the Conquest of the Desert became the most vertebral nonevent (Trouillot 1995) of Argentine historiography. The *nütram*'s exclusion produced silences in many different ways. First, by erasing the archives of social images, texts, traces, and vocalities of that period, and by exclusively considering the perspective of certain questions and categories from the past, the processes of nation-state formation—understood here as a set of more or less intentional decisions made in the interests of certain social groups or ideas (Wade 2007)—created the “nonevents” of Argentine history. The concentration camps in which many Mapuche people and families were confined; the forced relocation of children; the enslavement of indigenous labor; the physical torture, massive death, years of violence and misery, and territorial dispossession, were swept under the rug.

But many of the longest-lasting silences in Argentina's social imaginary were not due to hiding or ignoring these Mapuche stories but rather to the Western devaluation that allowed the parallel existence of the *nütram*. This was possible because of two disconnections between *nütram* and Western epistemologies: a disconnection from verisimilitude and a temporal disconnection. The first produces a distance between the events described in the *nütram* and “real facts” from the past, while the second produces a distance between the *nütram*'s mythical time and the time of recent history. For these reasons, the *nütram* did not have a place in the mausoleum of history texts and lost any opportunity to be heard as true knowledge of the past. I will concentrate briefly on these disconnections, because their effects endure in the stigmas and stereotypes that

are still used to justify the repressive policies of the Argentine state toward the Mapuche people.<sup>7</sup>

The *nütram*'s disconnection from verisimilitude was an easy task for state makers in that the experiences that the *nütram* addresses narratively understand the world as it was (and still is) maintained by Mapuche narrators. The ontological frame used to interpret facts and define ways of existence in the world differs profoundly from the European ontological frame from which the criteria of verisimilitude of modern science derives (Briones and Ramos 2016). In the *nütram*, historical agencies, political forces, alliances, and messages pertain to humans and nonhumans, living people and ancestors. The *nütram* is an ancient conversation, but one that cannot have a place in historiography, not even as an oral or peripheral source. An elderly Mapuche woman from the city of Bariloche explains the nature of the conversation in which the *nütram* acquires its sense of being like this:

Many words were lost, but the earth will speak again; it will talk again with the mountain, the trees. The ancients said that in those places there are conversations, the spirits will be known, the spirits will be back and we will be able to learn again. We are again raising our words, and we will be standing on our feet again. (quoted in Ramos and Cañuqueo 2018)

Therefore, tales where a *nawel* (tiger) guides an elderly woman as she is running away from a concentration camp, or stories that tell how ancestors would appear to help a family escape from the army, or tales about how people who live under the earth help other people recover their knowledge in order to end their misery, were never considered to have truth value according to the epistemological and ontological criteria that determine "what really happened." On the contrary, these stories were gathered together and published in books of "indigenous legends" or "Mapuche legends." And, because they were categorized as legends, myths, traditions, or beliefs in a folkloric tradition, they became narratives without any connection whatsoever with history, science, or the truth about what had happened (Ramos 2010).

The *nütram*'s temporal disconnection resulted from a more complex process. Clearly, when the *nütram* is made into a myth or legend, what is narrated stays outside history, in the alleged atemporality of "people without history" or "cold societies." But it also has a correlation with the way in which the "conquest of

the Americas” was constructed in the social imaginary as the only colonization event, including the arrival of Columbus to the continent, the explorations and conquests of the Spanish Crown, and the military campaigns against indigenous people conducted by nation-states in the nineteenth century. Condensing all these events within the symbolic “quincentenary” annihilates the fact that the Mapuche people were sovereign in their territory only 130 years ago. In the opposite sense, but with similar effects, in 2010 Argentina celebrated its bicentenary, taking 1810 as its date of origin, when independence was declared from the Spanish Crown. In the interim, Argentine military campaigns against the Mapuche people began in the 1870s, concentration camps were established and continued until the end of the 1890s, and the Mapuche people sought to return to their territories at least into the 1930s. The longevity conferred on the state-nation-territory matrix (see Delrio and Pérez’s chapter in this volume) called “Argentina” made the violent events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unthinkable and chronologically distant; in the best-case scenario, it is assumed that those events must have occurred at least two hundred years ago. In this way, the unhistorical time of myth, the five hundred years of colonization, and the longevity of the Argentine nation are reinforced. These different, meaning-laden timelines make it impossible to think about Mapuche tales from the *nütram* as recent memory. Meanwhile, the experiences of repression and violence during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 are a part of our recent history of pain, and constitute our subjective expression of citizenship and a consensuated model that has been institutionalized in such expressions as *nunca más* (never again) and *no olvidar* (no forgetting). The experiences of violence that the Mapuche people have suffered for the past 130 years, and that continue today,<sup>8</sup> could never be thought of by Argentine society as a recent history of pain and even less as constitutive of our expressions of democracy and citizenship.

Nevertheless, the *nütram* carry on with their own flow of transmission as an underground memory (Pollak 2006) for the Mapuche people, on the outskirts of Patagonia’s larger cities and in towns and rural zones distant from each other. The Mapuche have continued to narrate and listen, at the core of their most intimate groups or spaces reserved for activism, to “the stories of their grandfathers and grandmothers.” With those tales, Mapuche today take on their own identity searches; they maintain their claims and articulate alliances to retain or recover their territories. The *nütram* has been the material



with which the Mapuche people have undertaken the simultaneous processes of restoring their memories, producing ancestral knowledge, and maintaining the world. The *nütram* have created shared bonds of belonging between people with diverse social trajectories. Ultimately, the *nütram* have held together the exchange of words and conversation that gives sense to the expression “we will be standing on our feet again” (quoted above).

Today, Argentina faces a particular historical context. We are observing the rise of two parallel yet related processes. On the one hand, the hegemonic discourses—those heard in the media or read about in official texts such as books, judicial files, and congressional debates—construct the Mapuche regaining his territory in an unusual way: he is no longer simply “foreign” (Chilean) or a “fake Indian,” but also a “terrorist.” On the other hand, the Argentine state has intensified its repressive policies,<sup>9</sup> appealing to tropes such as the conspiratorial intervention of alleged foreign interests in Mapuche struggles, the irrational and threatening violence of certain Mapuche sectors, and the illegitimacy of their historical claims. Precisely for this reason, today more than ever, scholars should cooperate with the Mapuche project of holding the *nütram* in high regard to begin to understand, for the first time, the affective and political significance and sense of being part of a history of violence in the past and the present. In sum, the *nütram* are not the last traces of an ancient culture or an extinguished tradition. Their social significance and meanings are contrary to their earlier collection as myths and legends; they are living historical phenomena whose validity has as much to do with their character of truth as with their status as recent memory.

Several authors have pointed out that crises, moments of violence and disruption, often have the most significant effects on human life experiences (Melion and Kuchler 1991; Carsten 2007). Experiences of pain, suffering, dismantling, and loss inaugurate the process of memory as people struggle to articulate what is being maintained by a society that has been subjugated and fragmented. The *nütram* are pieces of verbal art in which the Mapuche have inscribed these experiences as shared images. And, as those images were passed on to others as something to be kept in their memories, they became a focus of Mapuche social memory. In the same way, one could argue that these experiences of violence structured the tales of belonging of those who think of themselves as survivors, and of their people as an affective and political community under ongoing reconstruction. The so-called Conquest of the Desert,

far from being a distant temporal event, is the main theme of current Mapuche social memory because it is the context in which the most necessary advice and ancestral knowledge consolidate and are constantly re-created so that the Mapuche people can “keep rising.”

### Final Words: Political Projects and the Restoration of Memories

The *nütram* are the discursive genre through which the Mapuche people have historically inscribed their experiences of pain, their sad stories, and their evidence about what really happened in the past. Generated in different contexts of violence, they renew and combine memories through the *longue durée* of history, revealing that the official dates that circumscribe the violence between 1878 and 1885 are a fictional narrative of official history, because those experiences of violence, mistreatment, and exclusion have carried on systematically to the present day. The *nütram* also function as interpretational frames for the past, in which the trajectories of the ancestors are tied in a common text with the trajectories in progress, producing a historical continuity that collides with their own temporalities and events in the fractures, the erasures, and the silences of the national historiography. In the social imaginary of the Argentine people, the systematic violence toward the Mapuche people has always been silenced, but the *nütram*, in the privacy of Mapuche homes, has kept this knowledge alive.

The poetic choice of structuring memories from the past as narratives that value the ways of “returning” from different experiences of violence has also been a political decision. The *nütram* have oriented Mapuche actions in the struggles of new generations toward the permanent recuperation of territories, knowledge, and social bonds. The *nütram* continue to renew similar interpretations of history and also inspire the production of new *nütram*.

These experiences of pain are deeply constructive in the biographies of the Mapuche who are living today on the outskirts of Patagonia’s big cities, and in rural zones and towns, because they have shaped their own life trajectories as they shaped those of their parents and grandparents. They have circulated within larger- or smaller-scale contexts of violence (specifically, state repression at the hands of security forces), and most have also affected the daily lives of the Mapuche at school, in the streets, in dealing with bureaucracy, in prison, in their experiences with alcohol, drugs, hunger, and misery, and so on. But these experiences—whose immediate effects are the destruction of a people—are

internalized as significant silences to give existence to the social memory of a people in ongoing reconstruction. This memory, focusing on different ways of returning, constitutes the main performative tool in reestablishing a living world that the ancestors narrated in the *nütram*.

The ways in which silences and words join together in the *nütram*, on the one hand, organize the recent memory of the Mapuche people affectively and politically and, on the other, underscore their validity. It is a recent memory because the repression, the forced relocation, and the massive death occurred just a hundred years ago, and, in many families, it is the grandparents of the living who experienced those events and “knew how to cry when they remembered.” But also, because they did not exist in the national imaginary, those events of terror were never deeply questioned by the rest of society, nor were reparations offered by state policies. And this is far more serious, because the effects of that absence are still operating in the halls of power to justify repression and violence toward the Mapuche in the present. Thus, the validity of these memories—implicit or explicit in the *nütram*—reside in the living reality of these violent events for the Mapuche people, as much as the political and performative potential of narratives of returning.

In conclusion, I would like to examine how some Mapuche activists have been incorporating the *nütram*'s historical sensibilities as political philosophies into their different revitalization and resistance projects. The *nütram* often function as commands from the ancestors that give advice about how to continue the course of history. On the one hand, the *nütram* command Mapuche to continue the struggle undertaken by the ancestors to redress injustices, to hold the people in esteem and value their unity in the face of the fracturing and painful effects of state genocide. On the other, the *nütram* command Mapuche to remember the quest to reconstitute a world in which constitutive relationships, between humans and nonhumans and with the ancestors, are defined again in terms of conversation or binding reciprocity. But, within these general interpretive patterns of the *nütram*, those who experienced violence, pain, and injustice—the young and old, in urban and rural communities—each also highlight their individual trajectories. The entangled transmissions of the *nütram* allow for diverse ways of relating past and present, in order to restore the history of the Mapuche people. In this way, the *nütram* also allow the gestation of political projects according to how each person experiences and understands his or her own “returning” to Mapuche identity.

In a 2017, an autonomous Mapuche parliament (*trawn*) convened at Cañio community in Chubut Province. Many Mapuche activists participated in the meeting, including those who defend their territory from potential evictions in rural areas and others who, because they have recently left the cities, are now fighting for territorial recuperation in rural areas. While sitting by the fire, they conversed about a recent event in which a member of Cañio community had been involved; he was unjustly suspected of being part of an alleged armed organization and of having stabbed someone. The members of the *trawn* decided that, in order to answer those false accusations in a collective way, it was necessary to begin the conversation with a *nütram*. After sharing their *nütram* of return, heard in the intimacy of their families and communities, they concentrated on describing their own returns. I will not delve deeply here into the interesting discussion that this topic generated, but I quote the words that one of the participants used to synthesize the main ideas:

The main topic is to know how to continue the writing of that history, how we can still give continuity to those tales. The *nütram* is an indicator of paths, and we see that each one of us has kept giving them continuity in our own way. The subject generates many feelings, and to each one of us those feelings connote different hopes and different bonding. But according to what we just listened to, and despite our differences, we are all returning as well. The *nütram* acquired its importance and strength so that it can show us which is the right path that will help us to return to our true way of being Mapuche. We suggested that the *nütram* were for a long time understood as fable, but as Marilyn [a participant of the *trawn*] said, the most serious part of all was that we also came to think that we didn't exist as well. Because we considered what was being told in the *nütram* as not entirely the truth, we were denying ourselves. We are that history; to deny it is to deny ourselves. To return to the Mapuche self is far more complex than to return to a physical place, and just like the *winka* society never understood our *nütram*, now it can't understand our political projects of return. They can't understand why Cañio community members have decided to think of themselves as being Mapuche and to defend the mountain from the touristic undertaking that the state wants to do; they can't understand our *kimun* [knowledge] about the existence of the beings who inhabit

the place. Inasmuch as we began to strengthen ourselves in our kimun, we begin to understand the shared responsibility of looking after the territories in which our ancestors lived or that we live in, to protect those lands so that the forces that live there and allow us to live as Mapuche can continue to exist. Our return is not only to the territory that we defend or recover; it is also mainly a return to the Mapuche ways of inhabiting it. That is why we are going through a very difficult phase in comparison to the rest of the society that isn't Mapuche; our knowledge is deeper, and so is the incomprehension of the rest of the society toward us. Everything that it is happening to us now is going to be misunderstood. But we also know that our struggles, whether they are small or big, are the returns that later on will be the new *nütram*, even though some may want to call them fables. That is how we build our history. (Trawn, December 2017)

The memories of the army's campaigns against the Mapuche people at the end of the nineteenth century are called "sad stories" by the Mapuche, and, more often than before, they are now being remembered and are renewing feelings of pain and injustice. In *nütram*, those images of violence and suffering were "muted, . . . yet their muteness spoke memory" (Dwyer 2009, 127). It is by attending to how silence blocks the emergence of certain conclusions and enables the articulation of others that we can recognize the value and importance that Mapuche agency has had in the regeneration of their affective and political bonds, with which the Mapuche people have managed to reconstruct and are still reconstructing themselves.

## Notes

1. In the Mapuche language, *nütram* refers to the discursive genre of "true story/ies." In this language, the singular or plural is grammatically indicated in the sentence and is not specified by the form of the noun.

2. The way in which we understand the *nütram* here (as a communicative event or performance, which, by its poetic form, points out the interpretive context in which what is being told as much as what is being assumed acquires specific sociocultural senses) is framed in studies of the ethnography of the performance (Bauman and Briggs 1990) and perspective (Golluscio 2006) of Mapuche verbal art. Since in previous works we focused on the narrative poetics of *nütram* (Ramos 2017), we mention

here only those that accentuate their character of truth, of retransmission and advice. The truth often indexicalized itself through metacommunicative comments of openness and enclosure (“she experienced that when she was nine years old,” “it occurred like that”), and retransmission by the repetition of verbs about saying (“they say,” “they say that they said”). The relation between narratives and advice is inspired by Walter Benjamin’s ([1936] 1991) proposition about poetics in the art of narrating (Wolin 1994; Hillach 2014).

3. Note to the reader: I, Carolyn R. Larson, contributed to the editing of these excerpts. I have made every effort to remain faithful to the original and to honor the authorial rights of Ana Ramos, but I also take full responsibility for any inaccuracies or misinterpretations that might exist.

4. Grandmother of Mauro Millan (Mapuche activist from Chubut Province), interview with the author, 2007.

5. Because it is referred as “tapiñen,” the lion is no longer considered a biological animal and rather is understood as a representation of the forces of nature and the ancestors.

6. A *tayil* is a sacred song or chant with which the Mapuche communicate with the forces of nature in order to promote well-being or to establish an agreement about living together (“leave each other at peace”).

7. The illegitimacy of Mapuche claims are often currently presented through the following stereotypes and inventions: the Mapuche are Chileans; the Mapuche are violent; and even, the Mapuche do not preexist the Argentine nation-state.

8. State policies of repression and violence against the Mapuche people did not end with the military campaigns of the nineteenth century, as they continue in the systematic practices of eviction and territorial removal; various interventions by security forces that have included torture, humiliation, and death; and the absence of policies truly respectful of Mapuche autonomy in order to enable intercultural coexistence.

9. In 2017, in Patagonia, repression and violence once again became a theme of everyday life. First, the border patrol (*gendarmería*) suppressed a social protest at Pu Lof en Resistencia in Cushamen (a Mapuche community), and a young man who was there in solidarity with the indigenous cause died during the operation. A few months later, in a territory that had been recovered by the Lof Lafken Winkul (another Mapuche community), security forces (*prefectura*) opened fire on young Mapuche who were preparing to begin a ceremony, killing one and injuring others. In addition to renewing historical pains, these two events have been challenge for Argentine conceptions of the Mapuche, who many believed had already won certain rights, a voice in debate, and the means of negotiating with the state (Briones and Ramos 2018).