Moving Patagonia

Chapter · May 2023
DOI: 10.4324/9781003321163-15

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Mobilities in Remote Places

Edited by Phillip Vannini

Routledge
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11 Moving Patagonia

Contemporary Rural Dwelling through *estancias*, *puestos*, and *puesteros*

Pablo Mansilla-Quiñones, Paola Jirón-Martínez, and Walter Imilan-Ojeda

Remote Patagonia, a territory shared by Chile and Argentina, possesses a unique character that stands out on a global scale for its geographical exceptionality and the ways of life that its inhabitants have developed over the years. Its vast territorial extension, low population density, poor connectivity, and geographical isolation would lead one to think that its inhabitants tend to be immobile. However, distinct movements of people, goods, and information make up a fundamental dimension of Patagonian life (Vázquez, 2017). In this chapter, we show how Patagonia's territory is characterized by a mobile and relational nature generated by the mobilities of people, animals, goods, and ideas. However, rural dwellers' mobility and accessibility are historically conditioned by the latifundiary system of sheep farming, which has extended from the nineteenth century to the present. As pointed out by Bascopé Julio (2008), these structures of economic power determine Patagonia's territoriality and mobility. In his words: "Animal, human and mercantile circulation was the basis of the cattle empire" (2008, p. 30).

A latifundium is "a great landed estate with primitive agriculture and labor often in a state of partial servitude" (Merriam-Webster dictionary). In Patagonia, the high concentration of land in the private hands of sheep production latifundia—called *estancias*—has made it impossible to create human settlements that provide rural dwellers access to housing and land. This generates a condition of rural underpopulation, which hinders the possibility of increasing the number of inhabitants in rural settlements (Martinic, 2006). As the economic decline of these forms of rural work and generational changes affect work practices, the rural territories of Patagonia currently face processes of significant depopulation (Uribe and Mansilla, 2022). A considerable number of young rural Patagonians and their families migrate to larger cities in search of opportunities and this determines not only demographic decreases but also a form of shrinking rural dwelling (Mansilla et al., 2021).

Rural workers who lack access to land or means of production use their mobility as capital to access employment, creating unique ways of inhabiting a rural territory, which we argue to be "in motion" (see Kaufman et al., 2004). In this chapter, we describe how such territory is in motion by narrating the mobile territorialities of the inhabitants of rural Patagonia called *puesteros. Puesteros* are

rural workers who dwell in remote areas inside sheep production fields and are responsible for tending to the interior fields of *estancias* to care for sheep and the fields. Their work, a form of mobile dwelling, shows that mobility and immobility are key to understanding the ways in which Patagonia has been inhabited and crucial to stop the ongoing processes of depopulation and rural shrinkage.

Between 2018 and 2020, in the context of a broader fieldwork project titled "'*undwelling*' the *extremes: new ways of inhabiting the* rural in Magallanes," we worked with an ethnographic research team composed of geographers and anthropologists in the rural territories of Magallanes undergoing a depopulation process. From an ethnographic perspective, and through a territorial and mobility approach, we describe the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization experienced by the inhabitants of rural human settlements as a result of accelerated depopulation.

The collective ethnography (Jirón and Imilan, 2018) took place in the districts of Laguna Blanca, San Gregorio, and Timaukel in Tierra del Fuego where we interviewed over 70 inhabitants of rural areas. In addition to interviews, we carried out participant observation, whereby a group of ethnographers lived for a period of one month in two rural settlements in San Gregorio and Timaukel, sharing and learning from rural daily practices.

Theoretical Framework

The mobility approach goes beyond describing how subjects move from a place of origin to one of destination as it aims to understand movement as a significant part of the space-time experience of dwelling in the world (Jirón and Mansilla-Quiñones, 2014). Thus, the ways of inhabiting a territory are relationally constituted through movement and fluidity (Cresswell, 2011; Sheller and Urry, 2006). Understanding territories as relational (Massey, 2012) implies seeing them as more than mere containers of activities, spaces to be analyzed from above, or a set of geo-referenced indicators on a map to be controlled from a distance or to be used in predictions of population behaviors (Jirón and Imilan, 2018). Understanding territory as relational implies recognizing that we are affected by them just as we affect them with our practices and our bodies (Mansilla and Imilan, 2019). It means that what happens in one place impacts another, even if from a distance and sometimes imperceptibly. It also implies understanding that the territorial experience is not the same for everyone and that different people dwell on them differently according to socioeconomic status, gender, age, life cycle, ethnicity, abilities, etc. (Imilan et al., 2020). In other words, territorial experiences are multiple and differentiated and must be observed as intersectional (Hopkins, 2018). Above all, it means that the concept of territory is dynamic, not fixed, and that those who inhabit it, humans and non-humans, dwell in constant movement. Mobilities refer not only to the ways in which people, their bodies, things, and diseases move but also to the impact that these mobilities have on the lives of those who move (Jirón and Imilán, 2018). That is, the way people's lives are interrelated and interdependent with mobility allows us to move in today's

world (Jirón and Gómez, 2018). Specifically, everything moves and, at the same time, these mobilities are inextricably linked to multiple forms of immobility.

Undwelling, the abandonment of rural settlements, can be considered one of the characteristics of our time and one of the transformations in the forms of land use that occur in the context of environmental change (McLeman, 2011). In the context of the Anthropocene, the practice of undwelling is increasingly recurrent, millions of people worldwide are more or less forced to move and leave their territories due to drastic socio-ecological transformations (Uribe-Sierra et al., 2022).

Deepening the understanding of this situation requires going beyond a simple demographic perspective (Uribe and Mansilla, 2022). For Giglia (2012, p. 13), dwelling is related to the practices and spatial representations of subjects in spaces: "It is the process by which the subject is placed at the center of space-time coordinates, through his perception and his relationship with the environment that surrounds him [sic]." In a complementary way, authors such as Imilan, Jirón, and Iturra (2018) point out the relevance of integrating a dynamic notion of dwelling that investigates the way in which inhabitants produce space in a mobile way, as well as the experiences that emerge from this movement.

Given the above, we propose a phenomenological approach to depopulation through the concept of "undwelling." The concept helps us understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the spatiality of everyday life, namely the way in which inhabitants socio-spatially experience, perceive, and represent the abandonment of their life territories. This perspective opens questions such as: What stories and geographies of daily life are behind the negative figures of demographic decline? How are forms of undwelling marked by relations of power and agency in the face of deterritorialization? And how relevant are practices of mobility and the formation of mobile territorialities in these remote places?

To understand the power relations that affect undwelling, it is important to understand the processes of deterritorialization formed through inhabitants' loss of material and symbolic control over their life spaces (Haesbaert, 2014). At the same time, we need to understand reterritorialization as the ways in which people carry out practices of territorial reconfiguration (Mansilla and Imilan, 2019).

Patagonia Is a Mobile Territory, and Its Inhabitants Are Passengers

A rapid historical review of the forms of land use in Patagonia shows that mobility has always been a central aspect of the local ways of life. First, it emerged in the territorial practices of native peoples such as the Chonos, Kawéskar, Yaganes, Selk'nam, and Aónikenk, who moved by foot or navigation as a way to subsist in these territories. Subsequently, in the face of the advance of European colonialism and the formation of the modern capitalist world system, global maritime mobility through the Strait of Magellan was imposed and dramatically affected other territorialities including those of original peoples. Its main consequence was the establishment of a particular form of settlement colonialism, focused on sheep exploitation for wool and meat

production and export to international markets. The process of accumulation by dispossession that accompanied this period implied a necropolitical action through the massive annihilation of native peoples, considering them a threat to sheep production (Harambour, 2017). In a third moment, which extended from the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth century, new mobilities emerged from the trajectories of Chiloé and Croatian migrants who came to inhabit these territories in search of work and their reterritorialization practices forged a significant part of the Patagonian territorial identity (Molina, 2011). A fourth dynamic of dwelling in motion comprises the role that mobility practices have historically had in relation to the transboundary condition of Patagonia between Chile and Argentina (Harambour, 2012).

The current dynamic extends from the mid-twentieth century to the present, associated with energy exploitation in Patagonia, starting with oil exploitation, continuing with the extraction of gas and methanol, and more recently, with the exploitation of green hydrogen. These last dynamics generate the commuting of workers who move in shift systems from cities to the areas of extraction. At the same time, tourism has acquired a preponderant condition in the mobility of thousands of global tourists who come to visit these remote places.

The current socio-spatial formation of Patagonia is a clear example of the way in which economic power operates over territory, mobilities, and territorialities.[1] At the end of the nineteenth century, Patagonia was introduced into the modern capitalist world system, feeding part of the demand for sheep meat and wool by the British Empire (Harambour, 2017). This economic configuration represents a fundamental mark in the social production of the rural territories of Patagonia. Through the figure of the *estancia*, a latifundiary socio-spatial formation was installed which emulated the British sheep production farm.

The imposition of *estancias* in Patagonia was established through violent mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession, which destroyed previous forms of territoriality of the native peoples, since their nomadic territorial practices transgressed the limits imposed by the fences of the latifundia (Harambour, 2012). Although over time estancia owners have experienced change, the latifundiary configuration introduced in Patagonia has been extended to the present time as one of the main forms of the structuring of rural property. As Bascopé Julio (2008) points out, the configuration of the *estanciero* system constitutes a biopolitical power that falls on the territory and its inhabitants, transforming workers into *pasajeros rurales* or rural *passengers*, an expression used in rural jargon to indicate landless workers who were in a state of permanent mobility wandering on rural roads between *estancias* and *puestos*.[2] As Bascopé Julio (2008) points out:

> Unlike what happened and happens in other latitudes, in the Patagonian steppe migration did not have cycles: in particular for Europeans, although among nationals it was progressively, the end of the season did not mark the return home. The migrant thus became nomadic.
>
> (Bascopé Julio, 2008, p. 19)

During this time, the hiring system in the *estancias* was in the form of *trabajadores sueltos* or loose workers*, that is, people who moved individually between different estancias where they offered their labor. As Bascopé Julio (2008) points out, this type of work had a marked seasonality according to the rural work calendar. After the shearing seasons, and especially during the winter, workers were left wandering in rural areas. Other working passengers were welcomed by the stallholders. Due to the remoteness of locations, and the fact that they were never visited by the *estancias'* owners, the *puestos* became a hideout for these workers who lived in constant movement. This generated a social problem and an economic cost for *estancias*. Faced with this situation, *estancias'* administrators were forced to offer accommodation and food to passengers during these periods to avoid further damage to their property.

As we have been able to verify through our ethnographic work, rural passengers have now disappeared from rural territories, present only in the memory of rural inhabitants. However, there are other configurations of rural dwellings in motion.

> Yes, they no longer allow them there … only for a while … If one passed by in passing, they would give him accommodation for one night and the next day, good bye as if they were not even there. Now I think that the "stays" or accommodation give people, some sides no longer give … A lot has been lost. For example, before, the same, in the wires, all the wires in the corners, in the … where the … The wires were left doors for passengers to pass. Not now, all wires are blind, not anymore … They do not make door for passengers as before, and there is no longer a passenger on the road either, if one starts to look … It no longer walks, the farmers who herd do it with their own people no more than the "estancias," and no longer hire passengers per day as they did before. He has missed many things.
>
> (Juan, Wiring of "estancias," 58 years old,
> Commune of Timaukel, Tierra del Fuego, Chile)

The size of *estancias* can vary considerably. We observed *estancias* that reached 100,000 hectares of land with more than 30,000 sheep under the control of a single owner. At present, there is evidence of a reterritorialization of traditional rural settlements in the form of corporate territories (Silveira, 2007), structured by large extractive companies, where the inhabitants only pass through these places and do not generate a relationship of dwelling. Some are based on extractive dynamics associated with oil, methanol, and green hydrogen, configuring corporate territories which mobilize commuting workers. Authors such as Mandujano-Bustamente et al. (2016) have described other recent dynamics of reterritorialization such as residential mobility generated by the purchase of second homes in cities or localities equipped with infrastructure (promoting the emigration of families from rural areas for educational purposes and for the search for opportunities); youth migration from urban centers to the national and regional capitals; and labor mobility by commuting, which includes travel to Argentina (see also the work of Soza-Amigo

and Aroca, 2010). Some of the unique practices of daily mobility that are deployed in the rural territories of Argentine Patagonia have been described in the work of Vázquez (2017).

"Puesteros" (In)mobility within Rural Territories

A particular form of territorial occupation takes place in small cabins called *puestos*, inhabited by workers called *puesteros*, whose task is taking care of a group of animals. *Puestos* are located several kilometers away from the center—*or hull*—rancher. They are very small and equipped with the essentials to spend a night or, at maximum, work season. They can be very old cabins reoccupied and refitted, or more currently, be built by the same workers. Often *puestos* are criticized by rural workers themselves due to their precarious conditions (lack of electricity, sewage, or gas heating). These conditions, on top of the lack of telephone and internet connectivity, discourage young people and families from residing in them, which partly explains the processes of rural depopulation.

   Puestos are designed as mobile homes as they are installed on sleds or metal rail-type structures or on metal or pneumatic wheels that facilitate dragging. They are usually pushed by tractors, formerly by horses or oxen, to the work points where they can remain for years. *Puestos* move in relation to the work rhythms of cattle, according to the systems of field rotation in place to maintain the soil and fatten animals. Environmental transformations of Patagonia due to climate change have caused significant modifications of socio-ecological systems that have had effects on fields' yield and on rural settlement systems.

Figure 11.1 Mobile *puesto* of a *puestero* who works as a fencer of rural properties. Its lower part has wheels that allow it to move through the rural fields.

There are also fixed *puestos*, which are maintained in a sector of the field that is used permanently. The fixed *puestos* in disuse are usually abandoned, which is why it is possible to see some in a state of deterioration on the roads. A *puesto* is delimited by a wooden and wire fence, which constitutes as a smaller paddock, in which there is also a manger and kennels for sheepdogs.

Puestos are supplied with facilities for feeding workers on a monthly basis, typically by another worker or by the administrator from the *casco* or ranch center. Dwelling and working in these remote places makes *puesteros* a solitary and sacrificial worker of *estancias*, valued for their effort by other rural workers. *Puesteros* go down to the city every one or two months. According to them, they tend to acquire a taste for solitude that remote life provides them, transforming themselves into a kind of hermit. *Puesteros* do not own these homes, which are owned by the owner or company. However, due to their remoteness, owners never visit these places.

The Story of a Young "Puestero" and His Rural Reterritorialization

Carlos is a young *puestero* who works as a shepherd. He is 28 years old and comes from the city of Punta Arenas, Chile. He currently lives inside the fields of the Laguna Blanca estancia in the district of Laguna Blanca, Chile, with his wife and two small children aged two and six. Along with his family, he represents a special case in Patagonia, as today few young people dwell and work in rural territories. Carlos points out that *estancia* owners have discouraged young families from coming, since they only tend to hire single men without a family, which partly explains the rural depopulation. He notes:

> Every now and then I would look for notices that would let me be with of my children and my wife … Working in the field you spend too much time away from the family a lot, similar to the fishing system, they get away from the family, and I was looking for … I tried to look for a job that could let me be with my family, because there are owners of *estancias* that do not receive marriages in the *puestos*, as they say, and less so with children, and here the ease was that … first of all, they accepted me with my wife, they accepted my young son and my daughter to school, so … And here in the village at least there is the school, the boarding school … the Rural Health Center. So, there is quite a bit of comfort, at least in this sector.

Carlos says he is the first generation in his family who lives and works in a rural area. His decision was based on his close bond with horses. This deep relationship with horses is common among young people who dwell in rural places. Most young people who work in rural territories participate in animal dressage parties called *jineteadas* and move through rural settlements of Chilean and Argentinean Patagonia in various rural festivals (Mansilla et al., 2021). The possibility of being with their herds of horses in rural establishments is a key motivation to dwell in rural territories.

The rural *puestos* of the *estancia* are located at a significant distance from the town and the sheds where the shearing work is carried out. To reach the *puestos*, you must travel on dirt roads and sometimes by horse ride.

> Of course, because of the fields, being in the *estancia* as a fixed point, in the heart of the *estancia*, as they say, would take too much time to get to where we are, for example from the *estancia* to where we are now would take two to three hours on horseback just to come one way, asides from having to go through the fields, then there to do it in one day, that's why they make different sectors, different *puestos*, and each *puestero* is in charge of his field.

Sheep farmers' daily mobility practices are linked to their rural work, particularly to the rhythms both of nature in climatic terms and of the animals they work with (Mansilla-Quiñones & Moreira-Muñoz, 2023). In rural areas, the annual work schedule is established by different times of sheep care and shearing. This calendar begins in the month of January with the *señalada*, when the ears of the animals are marked, the males are castrated, and their tails are cut. In February, lamb weaning takes place, when the young are separated from their mothers. The *esquila de ojos*, or eye shearing, is carried out between the months of April and May. This is when the wool concentrated around the eyes of the animals is extracted. Between the months of August–September–October, the pre-calving shearing is carried out to produce improvements in the pregnant sheep and their offspring.

In a regular period of work, when they are not in the shearing processes, *puesteros* begin their work early, leaving at 8:00 in the morning to tour the fields in their charge.

Figure 11.2 Sheep farmers herding a thousand sheep during the period called indicated or *señalada*.

The route we make varies, because … as one says to make runs in his field, looking out for dead animals. Where foxes beefs, then we have to go behind cleaning up the fields, if you find a dead animal you strip out the skin, you have to bring it to your *puesto*, so that the field doesn't get dirty with the wool because just like *caranchos* (bird), you know it, it eats a lot, and pecks, then it scatters the wool, and it dirties the field a lot (Carlos).

Carlos told us that he meets with another *puestero* to run the field under his care with him, because it is too big, based on an imaginary subdivision (see Figure 11.3).

(Interviewer): In time, how much, more or less …?

(Carlos): Until I get to the top, around two hours on horseback … An hour and a half, two hours, on top of the time of going through different fields … so then I go through Potrero and Vega Dos, of San Francisco, those are the three fields that I run.

(Int.): And how often do you make that run?

(Carlos): Every day.

(Int.): And that's basically looking for *mortecina* (dead animals)]?

(Carlos): Looking for *mortecino*, that the wires are fine, because the neighboring fields, still have animals, then animals pass here or ours can pass over there, it depends on the wiring. The fences, at least ours, we have them all in good condition, it's just the neighboring field that has a herd of *caballos*

Figure 11.3 Carlos and another shepherd working with sheep during la *señalada*

baguales (wild horses), which is the one I run, the San Francisco Grande above, and there you have to be careful because, of course, since the foals fight, break wires, horses pass over here, and you have to be checking those wires frequently.

During shearing periods, *puesteros* must take thousands of sheep to the shearing sheds located at the center or hull of the estancia, travelling great distances while maintaining control of the group. For example, Carlos says that

> For the *señalada*, we have a meeting schedule for rodeo, and the meeting time for all sheep farmers is at seven in the morning, but for me, to reach this point at that time, I must leave at 4:30 in the morning, at the latest at 5, it depends on the field in which I have to work on.

Interestingly, not everyone can fulfill the role of "shepherd" or *puestero*. The capacity to perform this function depends on the person's personality and rhythms. The person has to be calm and slow and know how to keep up with the sheep when they are herded from one place to another without losing patience and rushing them. Similarly, they must know how to coordinate the rhythms of the sheepdogs and their horse in the work practices and daily mobility. In this sense, sheep farmer's mobilities are arranged in multispecies relationships:

> The dog helps a lot because, firstly, he is the main one, because without the dog you can't carry a group of sheep, and more so if they are lambs, because lambs are complicated, on one side, because when one runs away they all do, not like sheep, with sheep you are able to herd them and a sheep opens to you, as they say, and you leave it alone, the dog returns it quickly, or if not the sheep returns on its own. But not lamb, they run away, and they don't stop.

Finally, the ethnographic work made it possible to recognize the relevance of cross-border mobility practices of rural dwellers. Although there is a tendency to make a distinction between Chilean and Argentinean Patagonia, the territorial limits become blurred from a cultural point of view because, in their rural ways, they broadly maintain unitary identity and social practices. For example, Carlos notes the mobilities of work tools and objects and the constant need to be in contact with Argentina:

> I don't know, there are plenty of things that are brought from Argentina. For instance, nowadays you don't see much of the old knives, an example, Eskilstuna, you see them, but they don't sell them like they used to, with the real Eskilstuna blade which is firm, you machete a wire and you won't see it chipped, nothing. Not now, the ones they sell are like tins. So, I bought this one in Argentina that is heaving to be able to work, it has a proper weight.

In the same way, Carlos as well as several rural young people move on both sides of the national borders in order to participate in wild horse dressage parties, where young riders from Chile and Argentina share rural experiences and compete in skill-based games. These festivals are fundamental for the exchange of knowledge that moves through Patagonia and the maintenance of rural ways of dwelling.

Final Reflections: Remote Places and (Un)dwelling

The process of rural undwelling is often related to the conditions of remoteness and isolation, as people seek to be increasingly connected and closer to urban settlements. In addition, the generational replacement of rural workers is becoming a crucial element, since at present young people resist the prospect of living in rural territories due to the efforts involved in dwelling in a remote and isolated place disconnected from families, technology, and basic infrastructures. These conditions have caused a significant number of families in rural localities to migrate to larger cities in search of opportunities. In this context, it is necessary to consider young people from rural territories as fundamental in the dynamics of rural reterritorialization of Patagonia (Mansilla et al., 2021).

A quick interpretation of the situation would lead to the conclusion that better provision of transport infrastructure and connectivity improvement would generate some level of rural repopulation in Patagonia. However, as shown through our research, the depopulation of remote places requires a more complex understanding that recognizes the multiplicity and interlinkage of the mobilities involved in such places. This complexity requires identifying the concepts of remoteness (Gibson et al., 2010; Botne, 2012), and the focus of mobilities (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Jirón and Imilán, 2018).

However, as Bocco (2016) points out, defining what is understood by remoteness is something complex, which cannot be reduced only to a standardized technical measure. As we have proposed in this chapter, it is necessary to approach from the perspective of the proximity or remoteness that is perceived by the inhabitants themselves.

Additionally, it is fundamental for the study of remote places and undwelling practices to incorporate a mobility perspective (Jirón and Imilan, 2018). As we have recognized in this chapter, the mobilities of rural inhabitants and the relational territories that make it up, as well as the new mobilities of corporate territories, represent reterritorialization in a context of crisis of rural undwelling. Even the living experiences of the *puesteros* demonstrate that rural inhabitants deploy mobility practices at different spatial and temporal scales, which allow them to live their lives in remote places. At the same time, they demonstrate how remote places are connected, configuring relational territories through the mobilities of people, animals, objects, and places.

Finally, it seems important to reflect on the approach of mobility, the forms of speed and rhythm found in remote places, particularly from the perspective of slowness (Vannini, 2014),

But what does slowness mean in the remote Patagonian context? Slowness in such places occurs in contradicting ways. It means recognizing the extractive economic industries that operate at quite fast rhythms in comparison to the slow rhythms of everyday shepherding. These contradicting paces also involve the relational nature of territories, where the decisions being made at times take place miles away, yet where territorial transformations are experienced in the bodies of *puesteros* inside the estancias. It also means that these bodies, in relation to their animals (including sheep, lamb, horses, dogs), the objects they move with (including knives, machines, phones, pots and pans), and the knowledges that are constantly moving, are also part of the territories being created, at times slowly, at times at paces that we can no longer keep track of. These are some of the keys that from the perspective of the everyday mobility approach in Patagonia could give sustainability to the forms of rural dwelling in remote places.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 A distinction is made between the concept of territory and territoriality. The latter refers to the spatial expression of the lived spaces of subjects (Bonnemaison, 2002). Territoriality comprises the relationship between subject and territory in an inseparable way, as a continuum (Mansilla and Imilan, 2019).
2 Puestos correspond to commonly mobile homes that are installed inside the estancia in places marked by difficult accessibility. In these places, a worker also known as puestero is sent to be responsible for caring for the animals and the field.

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