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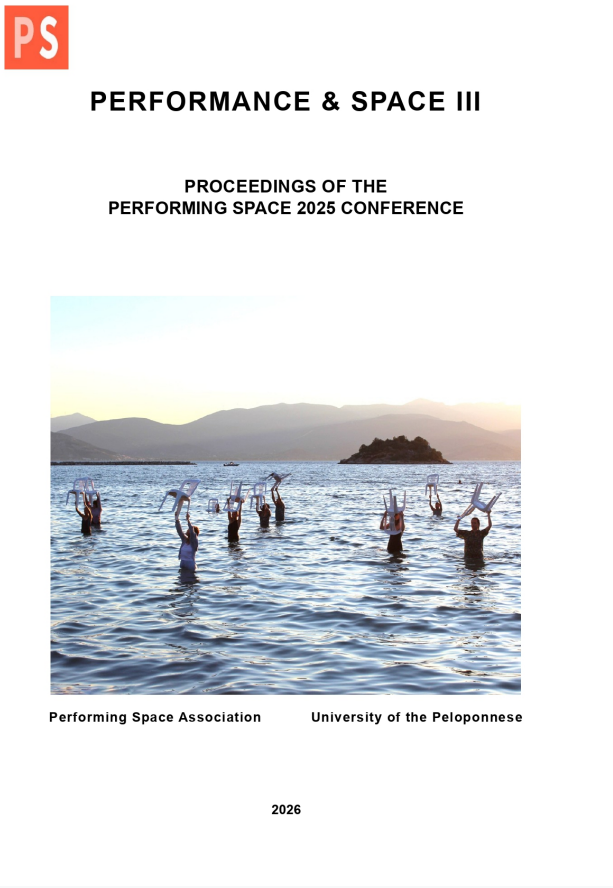

Living in Motion: Muleteer Corporalities and Territorialisation in the Maule Mountains, Chile

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Living in Motion: Muleteer Corporalities and Territorialisation in the Maule Mountains, Chile

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Abstract

This presentation presents the reflections that emerged during a doctoral research project that investigates, from a mobile ethnographic perspective, livestock mobility in the Maule Region, Chile, also known as *arriería* (muleteering). The methodological proposal allows the body of both the researcher and their collaborators to be placed at the centre of a mobile way of life.

The mobile living of muleteers posits an everyday life in which the moving body is the protagonist: the actors lead their animals along mountain routes, sleep under trees, cross rivers, ride for hours or days, and flood the landscape with sounds, presences, and emotions. Muleteering practice constitutes an embodied practice that weaves a strong relationship with the spaces they dwell in, which are not only travelled but become territories laden with meaning through ongoing practices and relations. Following Ingold (2012), we understand the environment as a work in constant construction, in which both humans and non-humans interact, generating a sensorial experience that shapes the way we dwell in it.

Thus, the mobile living of the mule drivers questions the classic categories of domestic space, workspace, and the rural, as it is redefined in the experience of mountain mobility. In parallel with ways of life increasingly influenced by virtuality and urban sedentarism, muleteering remains a living practice, strengthening the embodied and relational experience with the environment.

This article invites us to rethink territorialisation from the perspective of the bodies that walk, ride, and feel, proposing an ethnography that moves with its interlocutors and gives rise to situated and embodied forms of knowledge.

Keywords: Muleteering, dwelling, mobility, corporality, territorialisation.

Living in Motion

This article presents reflections derived from ongoing doctoral research on the practice of extensive mobile livestock farming in the Maule Region, Chile, known locally as *arriería* (muleteering).[1] The purpose of this doctoral research is to understand *muleteering* persistence as a complex social phenomenon in the contemporary context. Within this framework, fieldwork opened the possibility of analytically exploring the corporeal dimension and its role in the emergence of territorialities.

Muleteering is a type of livestock farming practiced by men and women dedicated to raising, reproducing, marketing, or using for subsistence different types of animals such as goats, sheep, cows, and horses, taking advantage of the seasonal availability of pastures. During the winter, both muleteers and animals remain in the valley or the foothills (wintering). Later, they begin the summer season, moving for days to the mountain pastures, where they remain for long periods. This strategy, recognised in various contexts as transhumance, is also practiced in Europe, Central Asia, and Africa (Dong, 2016; Zinsstag et al., 2016), forming part of a set of global pastoral practices.

Drawing on the ethnographic experience developed during my doctoral research, I propose to analyse muleteering as an embodied practice inscribed in human and animal bodies. I will also explore how transhumant mobility, sensory perception, and interaction with the environment become fundamental elements for understanding the production of territory and spaces through processes of territorialisation.

I highlight the use of a mobile methodological approach, which follows the journey of muleteers in the different stages of mobile livestock farming (wintering and summering), also putting the researcher's body in motion. This approach has been fundamental for reflecting on how the moving body dwell and relates to the environment when carrying out these types of practices. At the same time, it has allowed us to question what we understand by domestic space, work, and rurality.

Body in Motion: Muleteering as an Embodied Practice

Muleteering is not only a practice aimed at raising and transporting livestock, but a way of life that encompasses the experience of being in the world and is deeply embodied in the body. Muleteers walk, ride horses, cross rivers, sleep outdoors, and travel across territories

[1] This article forms part of a doctoral research project in social anthropology conducted within the Doctoral Programme in Anthropology at the Universidad Católica del Norte and the Universidad de Tarapacá (Chile). The research is situated within the fields of rural anthropology and mobility studies, and examines the practice of the extensive mobile livestock farming (arriería) in the Maule Region, Chile, through a mobile ethnography. The dissertation is supervised by Dr Carlos Chiappe (UCN). This research has been funded by ANID BECAS/DOCTORADO NACIONAL 21220628.

for days and nights. The body becomes the protagonist of this movement, establishing a relationship of mutual impact with the environment.

The journeys involve long hours of riding, hiking along mountain trails, river crossings, and steep ascents and descents that are inscribed in the corporeality. Following Csordas (2010), muleteering can be understood as an embodied practice, conveyed in gestures, postures, modes of somatic attention, bodily skills, and perceptual dispositions. The muleteer's body is challenged in its strength, balance, and endurance, while also establishing an interdependence with the animals that accompany them. During mobility, the human body is in constant contact with the bodies of animals of different species: one sleeps next to dogs for warmth, rides the horse's body to move, and maintains a situated attention through one's own body that articulates landscape, herd, and movement.

The relationship with the horse is exemplary in this sense. Through continuous contact, the muleteer develops somatic modes of attention that allow him to read the animal's and the terrain's responses with his own body. As Csordas (2010, p. 87, author’s translation) points out, these modes are "culturally elaborated ways of paying attention to, and with, one's own body, in environments that include the embodied presence of others," in this case animals, trees, rocks, hills, or rivers. Thus, it is not only vision or hearing that guides action, but also the legs, posture, and muscular tensions, which transmit information to the horse and, at the same time, receive its own. In this way, through small tensions in the legs, changes in body balance, and different sounds, the rider establishes a dialogue and a direct connection with the animal. Thus, in the sense proposed by Marcel Mauss (1971), it develops a traditional body technique that has been passed down through generations.

In everyday practice, this body dialogue allows one to regulate the distance between horses, avoid the risk of crushing their legs, choose appropriate places to mount (Figure 1), and recognise the limits of passage according to the animal's size. Similarly, the horse perceives the rider's presence in its body and adjusts its gait to that co-presence. This relationship between the body of the muleteer and the body of the horse is an embodied relationship that is part of the muleteer practice and is expressed in the muleteer's corporeality. The continuity of this practice transforms the human body: muleteers describe how long days of riding are inscribed on their bodies, leaving physical marks such as bowed legs and other bone problems.

The body, understood from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty (2010) and Csordas (1994), is not a mere instrument, but the place from which the world is known and dwelt in. Along these same lines, Le Breton (1990, p. 7, author’s translation) affirms that "human existence is corporeal". Thus, every action — riding, herding, sleeping under a tree — produces embodied knowledge that is inscribed in experience. Correspondingly, Ingold

(2012) emphasises that the environment is not a passive setting but rather is shaped by the constant interaction between humans and non-humans.

Figure 1
A muleteer steps onto a stone in order to mount his horse. Photograph by the author.

Participant observation during cattle drives between valleys and mountains (2023-2025) allowed us to observe how human and animal bodies are integrated into a dialogical relationship. The swaying of the horse, the muscular tension of the rider, and the constant attention to the herd shape a complex experience of co-presence, in which the body constitutes a conduit of knowledge and relationship with other living beings.

Territorialisation in Motion

Moving away from the idea of space as something static and "given," and following Ingold (2012), we understand the mountain range as a work in constant construction, the result of interactions between humans and non-humans that generate sensory and affective experiences. It is through the muleteer´s moving body that this space is experienced, recognised, and continually shaped in relation.

In this context, speaking of territorialisation implies understanding how, through inhabiting space in motion, muleteers' bodily presence participates in processes through which space becomes meaningful. When actors appropriate space, concretely or abstractly, they territorialise it (Raffestin, 2011), transforming it into territory. The muleteers' mobility

along paths, tracks, and trails is not mere transit: each route travelled, each rest under a tree, each river crossing generates a territory of dwelling, full of meanings and embodied experiences that shape the muleteers' trajectories.

The mountain range space thus becomes a lived and dynamic territory, in which humans, animals, the climate, and non-human elements participate. In this process, the muleteers and their animals advance as a large, mobile assemblage through which space reconfigures in movement. Shouts, whistles, barks, bleats, and the sound of walking on stones create a soundscape that, as it expands through valleys and forests, transforms the space into a sensitive territory of dwelling.

Figure 2
Shelter, garden, corrals, and hills in a summer pasture camp. Vegas de Guaiquivilo, Colbún, Maule Region. Photographer: Teo Rodelas.

This way of living questions the classic categories of domestic and work space, which in muleteer's life dissolve into mobility. Home is not a fixed space: it is continually constructed and redefined in movement.

Muleteer's territorialisation is not reduced to geographical boundaries or formal land ownership, but is understood as a relational process through which territories emerge from mobile practices involving bodies, materials, and landscapes. Every nap under a tree, every

river crossing, or every mountain lodge becomes places of significance, socially produced as a site of dwelling.

During the summer, muleteers' families set up temporary and precarious shelters made of stones, wood, plastic, or zinc. These condense the domestic and the productive: cooking, raising children, and caring for animals all occur in the same space. The nearby hills are grazing areas, and the corrals and water sources are part of the same spatial framework (Figure 2). Even during transfers, the home is mobile, built on the move. Stones become walls or seats (Figure 3), trees become closets (Figure 4), and the fire pit becomes a kitchen and a centre for socialising.

Figure 3

Inside the shelter, where stone is transformed into a wall. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4

A tree is used ad a cupboard to store and hang muleteering implements. Photograph by the author.

Territorialisation is thus expressed as an assemblage where the human, the animal, and the material participate together.

The concept of territorialisation we propose here distances itself from the classic vision of a fixed space and is understood as a continuous process in which the muleteers are participants in the ongoing formation of the environment they dwell in. As Ingold (2012) argues, knowledge is not constructed piecemeal, but rather "grows within us as we move skilfully through an environment that resembles meshwork" (p. 75, author's translation), a word he uses to refer to "mesh." In it, the muleteer mobilities are simultaneously a production of knowledge and a way of knowing: "moving is the way in which the body knows" (Ingold, 2012, p. 82, author's translation) and constructs the environment it dwells in.

Mobile Ethnography and Situated Knowledge

The analysis of these dynamics was made possible through moving ethnography. This methodological strategy involved accompanying the muleteers on their journeys, participating in their work, and bodily experiencing mountain life. It wasn't about observing from the outside, but rather being with them and sharing their journeys, which allowed for a deeper and more situated understanding of the territory and the relationships they maintain with it.

Mobile ethnography not only records information but is built on shared experience. It draws on the muleteers' daily experiences and the emotions and affections that emerge in the interaction. Through this process, a bodily and situated knowledge is generated, emerging from the continuous interaction between the researcher's body and the bodies of the muleteers on the move.

Riding horses for hours, walking with the herd, crossing rivers, and sleeping outdoors were all part of the fieldwork. The researcher's body became a record: the night's cold, muscular tension, the dampness of the rain, fatigue, and hunger were inscribed as ethnographic data. This allowed us to understand that the territory is not captured solely through sight, but also through smell, hearing, touch, and emotions. The smells of wet animals, smoke, and dust; the sounds of barking, bleating, and screaming; the sensations of heat, fear, joy, or fatigue are all part of an embodied knowledge.

The mobile ethnographic method allowed us to understand muleteering through the movement of one's own body, accessing dimensions of the practice that are not conveyed through words, but are part of being immersed. It is the sensory experience that underpins Ingold's (2000) idea of the "environment", which goes beyond conceiving space as a passive stage. Her perceptual shift proposes studying the world in constant construction, where human and non-human beings interact. Integrating this perspective is fundamental to contemporary anthropology, which is called to produce knowledge from co-presence and to include all organisms and manifestations of the environment as part of the analysis.

Conclusion

Muleteering in the Maule Mountains persists as a living practice that articulates humans, animals, and environments in a mobile dwelling. More than a means of production, it constitutes a way of life through which territories in motion emerge and questions the classic categories of domestic space, workspace, and rurality. Territory is not a fixed space, but a dynamic construction that emerges from the interaction between human and non-human bodies in motion.

The mountain space, often rendered invisible as an interstitial space, is redefined as a living space. In a world marked by virtuality and urban sedentarism, muleteering recalls the power of movement as a way of dwelling. The mobile body not only traverses space; it experiences and participates in the ongoing transformation of space through movement.

Rethinking territorialisation from this perspective allows us to recognise the value of mobile practices as sources of situated knowledge, collective identity, and cultural continuity, demonstrating their relevance in a contemporary context of territorial transformations and pressures.

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