

Roaming-with quiltros

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Where's our *quiltro*?

I have been looking for the *quiltro* that has been frequently roaming through my neighborhood. It has always been there, comfortably seated right next to the entrance of the liquor store or rummaging between the trash that people leave outside the supermarket's entry. It is an old dog, relatively fat, with short blackish fur and a friendly and relaxed expression. I really don't know whether it has a name or if someone feeds him. I wanted to take a picture of it, to illustrate this piece, but I just cannot find it. Its current disappearance is not strange or worrying, though. *Quiltros* are meant to roam, to "travel purposefully unhindered through a wide area" (Merriam-Webster 2003). Being here in one moment, disappearing in the next.

The very origin of the word is unclear, messy. Although most authors (for example Latcham 1823, 61) recognize the term as having Indigenous origins, probably Mapuche, little is actually known about its original meaning. Most sources only mention that it tends to refer to a "small, ordinary, street dog" (Valencia 1976, 326), usually arguing that its existence precedes the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, as the Mapuche had been known for having dogs as companions (Silva and Root-Bernstein 2021). Despite these shadowy origins, nowadays *quiltro* has become a widely used word in Chilean vernacular, a complex term carrying all kinds of implications and attachments. A *quiltro*, in most cases, is the canine equivalent of the figure of the "mestizo", the racial category applied to humans of (supposedly) mixed-race in Latin America (de la Cadena 2005). In a similar fashion, in daily parlance *Quiltro* tends to be used in a derogatory tone, signaling an entity that is not pure. But there is more to *quiltros* than a mere receptacle of racial prejudices.

As most visitors rapidly notice, *quiltros* are ubiquitous in Chilean cities. As soon as you start walking the streets of a city or spend some time in a square or park, you will see them, peacefully lying below trees, crossing

streets, looking for food in trashcans. Their presence by itself is not a Chilean exception, as it is calculated that around 75% of the 700 million dogs worldwide are free-roaming (Hughes and Macdonald 2013). In most parts of the world, such free roaming is seen as a problem, a product of urban precariousness (especially in the so-called global south) with many negative environmental and health consequences. As summarized by Arluke and Atema (2017, 112–13),

...these dogs occupy a liminal position; they are considered out of place and to not be in their prescribed role in society. Roaming dogs are perceived as neither domestic nor wild and as quite separate from and foreign to the human community, occupying a status that defines them as problematic, outcast, sometimes illegal, whom residents should avoid, control, or regulate, and perhaps even kill, because they are seen as disorderly, dirty, dangerous, and not part of a fixed social relationship.

In this short piece I would like to argue that *quiltros*, quite paradoxically, roam *differently* than these roaming dogs. In contrast with the image of the alienated roaming dog offered by the above quote, *quiltros roam-with* others;¹ they roam-with Chilean cities and its dwellers, they roam-with regulations, they roam-with politics. In order to explore these issues, I will briefly roam-with three Chilean quiltros: Snoopy, Cholito, and Negro matapacos.

Roaming the city with Snoopy

In a beautiful recent paper, Capellà Miternique & Gaunet (2020) analyze the case of different *quiltros* in Concepción, Chile's second largest city. Using an ethnographic-multispecies approach, they identify, catalog and analyze the daily behaviors of a group of dogs living in and around two areas of the city: a downtown square and a neighborhood located in the outskirts. Their first finding is that such animals belong to multiple dog categories from family dogs to feral ones. However, and more important to my argument, they also identify multiple cases in which dogs do not really adjust to any of the usual categories. Such dogs,

...are viewed as animals that may not necessarily be tame or domesticated, but which can live freely around humans, using

¹ Certainly, quiltros' roaming-with is not something exclusive of Chilean stray dogs. For a marvelous example of the roaming-with of stray dogs elsewhere, this time in Istanbul, see Elizabeth Lo's 2020 documentary "Stray".

their food and shelter (...) The dogs were also given food by both unfamiliar and familiar persons, and not only entered university classrooms that opened directly outside, but even rested there. A few were accidentally taken away in police vans with demonstrators during recurrent protests and marches in the Plaza (square) area that led law enforcement officers to use water cannons and police horses, a great attraction to the dogs. This degree of proximity has never been reported in other parts of the world. Additionally, although some dogs randomly crossed streets, they were often seen using crosswalks, either alone or with conspecifics (...). This safe behavior was probably learned either by observing (...) or by following pedestrians. (...) The dogs' behavior, therefore, reflected the pedestrians' nonthreatening and neutral attitudes toward them, and probably also their common prosocial behaviors (p. 7-8)

As described above, these familiar stray dogs – our *quiltros* – are clearly not pets, although they have several relationships with humans, usually involving affective attachments. Neither are they feral dogs, untamed animals living on the fringes of human societies. On the contrary, *quiltros* know perfectly how to behave in the city, freely establishing relationships with humans and other dogs and, even, participating in political demonstrations. Given their high degree of civility, not only are they not chased away, but in most cases “people behave as though the dogs were autonomous social agents that had their own space and habits in the city (...) contrary to typical Western cities that only tolerate pet and guard dogs and very few free-roaming owned dogs” (p. 7). Most of the time, the *quiltros* of Concepción were civil city dwellers, who roam-with many others, presenting highly sophisticated behavioral and affective patterns.

In some cases, such a relationship even evolved to form a fully symbiotic mutualist arrangement between the dog and the humans with whom he/she shared its living space, as the authors explore through the example of a dog called Snoopy, who lived in a neighborhood in the outskirts of the city.

Snoopy (...) acted as a companion and guard dog (i.e., a full pet) in the street environment, with two or three owners who fed him. In this context, not only did the stray dog gain the city as his territory, but the city also gained from his presence. (...) He would occasionally protect neighborhood children from unfamiliar stray dogs and even accompany neighbors who were

drunk. All this reinforced his charisma among neighbors. Snoopy developed into a kind of night watchman and guardian of the street, thus adapting perfectly to his new habitat. (...) He was thus a visible symbol of the relationships between local residents, and although nobody ever completely took ownership of him, he was recognized as an inhabitant of the street and a factor for social cohesion. (p. 13-14)

Quiltros such as Snoopy embody several roles, even acting as some kind of vigilantes for the neighborhood's inhabitants. In response, they earn some food and affection. By doing so, they materialize a positive urban experience of identity and belonging.

Roaming regulations with Cholito

Not all *quiltros'* roaming is welcomed, though. Besides the mutually caring relationship established with dogs such as Snoopy, daily encounters with *quiltros* could be a source of disgust, even fear. *Quiltros* are usually dirty, carrying unwanted companions such as ticks and scabies. They can be dangerous too, barking menacingly (even, in some cases, biting) if they feel you are threatening them or invading their territory. Reflecting this judgment, a nation-wide “Quality of Life” survey carried out by Chile’s Ministry of Health in 2016 asked people to indicate the worst environmental problems in their local areas (MINSAL 2017). Occupying the first place – well above traditional urban malaises such as noise, illegal dumpsters, air and water pollution, bad smells, etc. – appears “perros vagos” (stray dogs). Not all *quiltros* roam-with city dwellers, that is for sure.

However, this alienation could be also a source of novel forms of roaming-with, as it happened in the case of a *quiltro* known as Cholito. A well-known inhabitant of the Patronato area in downtown Santiago, in January 2017 Cholito was beaten to death by two people enraged by the dog’s habit of sleeping at the entrance of their store. After neighbors denounced such grim outcome through videos posted on social media, the killing became a national controversy concerning cruelty to animals, especially *quiltros*.

With the passage of time, this controversy motivated members of the Chilean parliament to propose a bill focused on animal protection. Beyond protection, the bill aimed at changing the way Chilean regulations regard animals, as it was argued by congressman Daniel Melo when introducing the motion:

After the profound impact generated in the public opinion by the images and stories surrounding the death of "Cholito", a stray dog killed in conditions of absolute inhumanity and brutality, the Parliament was demanded [to enact] an effective, timely and, above all, coherent regulation regarding the relationships that we establish, in general, with all living beings with whom we share this planet. Our current legislation, despite the deep love that animals arouse in us and in total contradiction with the evidence that we are in the presence of sentient beings capable of suffering by our actions or omissions, relegates them to the character of mere objects, and, therefore, in no way differentiates them from a thing that anyone can appropriate, dispose of and even destroy without any sanction. This is the situation that we are beginning to change with this bill(...) (BCN 2017, 676, translation by the author).

Although formally focused on animals with an owner, the "Cholito law" – as it was popularly known – nevertheless recognizes the difference between a stray dog and the figure of the "*perro comunitario*" (community dog), defining the latter as "a dog that has no particular owner but is fed and cared for by the community". Such definition, in practice, gave legal recognition to *quiltros* such as Snoopy and Cholito, making them subjects of certain rights and responsibilities. Communitarian dogs are no longer stray dogs, but roam-within a certain community.

Roaming politics with Negro Matapacos

Quite probably the most visible protagonist of the massive social protest movements started in Chile in October 2019 – known as "estallido" (ourbust) or "revuelta (revolt) social" – has been a *quiltro* known as Negro Matapacos, which is especially remarkable, given that the dog had by then been dead. Negro Matapacos (literally Black Cop-killer) became a household name during the student protests of 2011, when the dog frequently appeared on its own on the frontline of violent clashes between protestors and the police, usually barking furiously at the latter.² A rather large black dog, usually wearing a stylish red handkerchief around his neck, the dog rapidly became a national –

² You can watch it in action in this charming short documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIEFhAAWCiw>

and, growingly, international³ – celebrity, his death by natural causes in 2017 featuring prominently in several media outlets.

When an increase in the fare of the public transport network of Santiago triggered the most prominent social movement in Chile since the return of democracy in 1990, Negro Matapacos returned from the dead. This time it has become an icon, the source of countless visual representations from stencils to large Papier Mache statues. On some of them (left image), Negro Matapacos appeared happily jumping over ticket counting machines at a Metro Station, inviting users to dodge the fare (“Evade”). On others (right image), Negro Matapacos acquired an almost mythical character, the holy father of protests surrounded by his muses.



Figure 1: Representations of Negro Matapacos made during the Estallido Social.
Source: (Stephan and Cavada 2020, 8 & 15), Copyright (c) 2020 Cassiana Lopes
Stephan, Daniela Cavada

Through all these interventions, Negro Matapacos has become “perhaps the most illustrious and libertarian representation of how human and non-human relations increase when processes of politicization and dispute, in this case, for a dignified life, are amplified” (Skewes and Quiroz 2020). Although no longer in physical form, Negro Matapacos has continued to roam-with protestors in their fight for greater levels of equality and dignity in Chile.

Constituting-with *quiltros*?

³ For example, the dog has a rather comprehensive English language entry in Wikipedia, including an updated bio: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negro_Matapacos

The most prominent consequence of the Estallido Social has been the start of the process of replacing Chile's current constitution, made during Pinochet's dictatorship and the most severe steward of the program of radical neoliberal governance implemented in the country since the 1970s. A surprisingly high number of independents and progressives ended up being elected into the constitutional assembly in charge of the process, raising hopes of drafting a constitution that could deal more effectively with the challenges facing the country.

Many of the elected members of the assembly identify prominently with environmental issues, related not only to climate change adaptation, but also to the establishment of novel relationships with the natural world. Leaving behind centuries of extractivist modes of exploitation, mutually careful and restorative modes of relating are sought, especially through the introduction of specific rights for certain natural entities. In such a process, *quiltros* – as understood here – could be seen as fruitful figures for thinking these new modes of relating with non-human others.

In their constant roaming-with, *quiltros* are attached to multiple entities, and thus become more than mere stray dogs. And, more importantly, they roam between different forms of animal life. As the three cases explored in this piece show, *quiltros* are noteworthy for establishing an unseen relationship with humans: *companionship without ownership*. In many cases *quiltros* are certainly a companion species (Haraway 2008), objects of mutual care and responsibility with humans, foundations of urban multispecies communities and an inspiration for protest movements. But, and in contrast with usual western notions of pets, such attachments do not involve ownership. *Quiltros* are (mostly) sovereign subjects in Chilean cities; they are there but could also disappear, as happened to the *quiltro* in my neighborhood.

A *quiltro* signals the possibility of establishing novel relationships between natural entities and human beings, in which mutual care does not cancel animal sovereignty. Seen from the perspective of current discussions about rights of nature in the new constitution, being a *quiltro* could be taken as a practical way for animals to become sovereign subjects, widening the kind of entities with rights to recognition and protection. Through such operation we will not only occasionally roam-with *quiltros* such as Snoopy, Cholito and Negro Matapacos, but will finally grant them citizenship in our more-than-human worlds.

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