Broken Mobile Phones: Urban Indigenous Territorialities and Communication Technologies

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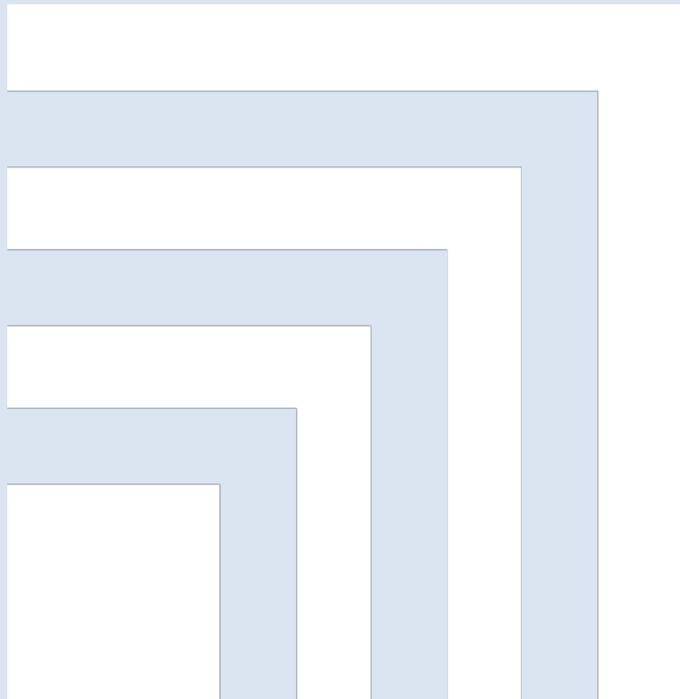
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Abstract:
In this paper I explore ethnographically the tension between urban Toba Indigenous People living in Buenos Aires, ubiquitous incorporation of mobile phones and the deep disconnecting effects mobile phones have when they break down. While mobile phones enable the intensification of informal economic activities and are used to mediate with state institutions, broken phones isolate, if only temporarily, urban Toba family members from each other and from their hard-built relations with people in the city. From a spatial perspective, broken mobile phones not only disrupt the flow of communication between people but also permanently restrain access to institutions and places in the city center. I argue that the current and limited forms of access to mobile phone communication and the managing of information both produce and dismantle the territorialities of urban indigenous networks. Mobile phones for the urban Toba, in short, both enable the fluidity of connections and re-create separation and segregation from the city.

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Introduction

Carlos is an Indigenous Toba man, living in Cortadera[1], a Toba *barrio* in an impoverished sector of Argentina's Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (in Spanish, AMBA). He gets regular invitations to deliver cultural workshops at schools in the center of Buenos Aires, two hours away from the *barrio*. Usually, he is not paid for his workshops; instead, he is allowed to sell handicrafts. While Carlos also gets sporadic employment in construction, the workshops provide an important income for him and his large family. Urban Toba in Cortadera call this "cultural work" in reference to the fact that they get contacted as indigenous people and are expected to share stories and knowledge as such. "Work" points to the effort this activity implies and the remuneration for selling crafts but veils the fact that part of the activity, the workshops and performances, is mostly unpaid.

In 2010, I followed Carlos as he prepared one of his workshops. Using his black, scratched Nokia, a phone he bought second hand from an informal vendor by the train station, Carlos made complex logistical arrangements. After he received the invitation, Carlos bought a prepaid phone card and added credit to his phone. These usually cost around five dollars and have enough credit to send a hundred texts from a pay-as-you-go phone. In the next days, I saw he was paying a lot of attention to his phone, which he carried in his front pocket. It made a low sound when a new message came in. He was always happy when he got a message because he could not always count on this. The reception was not always good in the *barrio* and he was constantly concerned he might not get important messages. He told me he was arranging the date and time and had agreed a schedule of activities with the headmaster. This saved Carlos from

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[1] All urban *barrios* inhabited by a majority of Toba indigenous people and many times under legal recognition as urban indigenous communities are named as "*barrios Toba.*" The pseudonym Cortadera is used to differentiate this *barrio* from the 14 other *barrios Toba* in Buenos Aires, and the multiple other *barrios* Toba in the peripheries of the cities of Rosario, La Plata, Santa Fe, Resistencia, and Formosa, among others.

having to commute to the school to plan the activity, which he explained was a very convenient aspect of having a mobile phone.

Simultaneously, Carlos' wife, Julia, texted her sister, Berta, who lives in a remote rural community in the Chaco, and asked her to send woven baskets for the workshop. She sent these messages from her own phone, and they were written in *Qom l'aqtaqa* (the Toba language); neither of them is an expert in writing their language, but Berta feels more comfortable communicating in it. The baskets Berta produces are made from reed and palm leaves she collects from the Chaco forest, reinforced with plastic strips cut from discarded bottles. In the city, these are the highest-earning handicrafts, sold for USD$15 each. When the baskets were ready, Berta sent them through a passenger bus company, and to ensure the packages would not get lost, Berta texted Julia clear information about the time of arrival and the driver's name.

A week before the workshop, Julia collected the packages from a nearby bus station while Carlos made arrangements for the day of the workshop. He texted the driver of a *remise* (informal taxi) who would take him and the packages to the school. Because I would be unable to travel in the already overloaded car, Carlos texted me the school's address, with specific directions and timing. The day of the workshop, everything ran smoothly and we each knew what to do and when. The taxi arrived on time, all teachers in the school followed the schedule arranged by Carlos and the headmaster, and while Carlos performed, I helped set up the handicraft booth. I calculated that Carlos had used at least half a phone card to coordinate everything, so part of the handicraft sale earnings was already dedicated to paying for the card and the *remise*.

In this vignette, text messages connected an urban Toba *barrio*, Cortadera on the outskirts of Buenos Aires city, with a school in downtown Buenos Aires and rural Toba communities in the Chaco (in the north of Argentina). This was a period in which Tobas, and popular sectors in Argentina in general, accessed personal communication for the first time. In a country where land lines are limited to urban areas and people with fixed addresses, popular sectors in the early 2000s relied on sending personal messages through a third person or traveling to communicate.

When mobile phones became ubiquitous amongst previously excluded populations in Argentina, the reach and speed of interactions was immediately affected, even when they extended over existing forms of relating and organizing activity. During my multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork following the spatial mobilities of urban Toba in 2010, phones had become widespread and were also key in doing ethnographic research. The possibilities enabled by this first-time access to personal communication among a highly mobile indigenous group immediately captured my attention, as I observed with enthusiasm how smoothly the technology has been incorporated. Initially I noticed how mobile phones were extending and intensifying connections within Toba networks that link families, communities and Toba evangelical churches together and were making activities such as cultural work easier and more frequent.[2]

Yet, I soon realized the adoption of phones had unforeseen consequences; they created frictions in communication and new forms of exclusion as well. When I directly inquired about how the introduction of the mobile phone affected his cultural work, Carlos paradoxically described owning a phone as an experience of loss and disconnection. He had bought his first phone soon after moving to Buenos Aires from the Chaco in 2005, but this phone had broken down two years later and he had lost all the information in it. After a big sigh he exclaimed, "So many phone numbers! So many addresses! All lost! Most of the people I had there are people I never saw again, and I never found those schools again." With the loss of the phone, and the impossibility to repair it or back up the contact information, Carlos had lost touch with people and organizations requesting cultural work, with employers in the construction industry, with shops who buy his handicrafts and connections from urban middle class interested in "helping out" in the *barrio*. While he recovered the contact information of family members and soon reconnected with the translocal religious music band he was part of (along with Toba musicians from the city of Rosario), he was never able to recover information from people and institutions in Buenos Aires. After losing information in this phone, he was out of work for a long period and had to rebuild relations with schools from scratch. I was surprised to find these experiences were common among other families in the *barrio*, and indeed the dual experiences of smooth

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[2] In 2009 for the first time I also found unavoidable to have a cellphone to do fieldwork (in my previous experience in 2005 and earlier, owning one as a researcher was just a personal preference).

incorporation of mobile technology and difficulty in maintaining access (such as having money to buy credit) is shared, too, with subaltern groups across the world (Ling and Donner 2012).

In this paper I explore the following paradox: while urban Toba indigenous people living on the outskirts of Buenos Aires have smoothly incorporated mobile phones, which allow them to intensify and expand their social networks with rural communities, mobile phones have deep disconnecting effects, given that broken phones disconnect urban Toba form their hard-built relations with people in the city. From a spatial perspective, broken mobile phones not only disrupt the flow of communication between people but also permanently restrain access to institutions and places in the city center. I argue that the current and limited forms of access to mobile phone communication and the managing of information both produce and dismantle the territorialities of urban indigenous networks. While indigenous networks build territorialities out of activities that link remote rural communities with urban and suburban areas and institutions in the city center, malfunctioning phones accentuate the precarity of their links to the city center, its markets and institutions. Mobile phones for the urban Toba, in short, both enable the fluidity of connections and re-create separation and segregation from the city.

This work is based on 18 months of fieldwork among urban Toba in Buenos Aires, Argentina. My ethnography included interviews and participant observation, which started in the *barrio* and then followed Toba women and men in their daily movements across the city.[3] In the course of fieldwork, my dependence on my phone grew as I became more engaged in planning travel, assisting people in bureaucratic procedures and scheduling interviews.

There has been a recent proliferation of research analyzing the ways in which subaltern groups have incorporated mobile phones. Initial economic analysis made celebratory descriptions about the positivity of the massive adoption of mobile phones among groups who were previously excluded from personal communication, in particular focusing on the transformation of informal economies (see, for example, Jensen 2007 and Jagun, Heeks and

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[3] During my fieldwork, I lived outside the *barrio* in a mixed-income *barrio* in Buenos Aires. My ethnography was thus multi-sited and mobile, tracing movements through the city, from the *barrio* to other marginal *barrios* in Buenos Aires, and from *barrio* to other cities and to rural communities in the Chaco region. I both physically travelled with people and traced the movement of objects and information to and from the *barrio*.

Whalley 2008). However, ethnographic approaches soon identified how material limitations in, for example, accessing credit and infrastructures that allow connectivity also generate negative effects such as tensions in social relations. Among these, Mirca Madianou shows both the possibilities and the strong limitations of parenting at a distance through mobile phones and social media among migrant Filipina workers and their children (Madianou and Miller 2011). Julie Soleil Archambault (2011) demonstrates the negative effects of mobile phone usage on romantic relations in southern Mozambique. Ethnography thus contradicts technological determinist perspectives that position technologies as vectors of social transformation independent from the users and social relations that produce them. Raymond Williams made this critique long ago in his analysis of television (1974), but these ideas still permeate perspectives on new technologies, as noted by Jo Tacchi (2012). Ethnography demonstrates persistent and new limitations that technologies offer even "after access," as the ethnographic perspective of Donner (2015) suggests.

In this paper, my primary focus is not on strategies for access (Donner 2015, Ling and Donner 2010, Unwin 2009) or the degree to which new technologies are incorporated into previous cultural practices (Horst and Miller 2006). Rather, I aim to discuss the effect they have over the making and remaking of indigenous relations to space, in particular the networks that link the city and rural areas. I follow a digital ethnography approach, which connects the sphere of communication with the making of material relations and highlights the context of technologies by spatializing their use in specific places (Postill 2014, Horst and Miller 2006). My perspective follows digital ethnographic approaches and takes into account a critical indigenous perspective on space and sovereignty (Simpson 2014). I therefore examine the effects of communication technologies in re-creating indigenous networks (Duarte 2017) and extend the examination of digital territorialities by linking virtual and material spaces as continuous (Todd 1996).

By territoriality I mean the emergent organization of people, object and non-human beings that results from practices that link heterogeneous elements from diverse contexts to create a new type of activity, interaction and organization, following the concept of assemblage as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) and De Landa (2006). In this work I am

particularly interested in the directly spatial dimensions of territoriality and less in the stabilizing effects over social identities and socialities. Sassen (2000) expands: territoriality emerges out of social practices that make an effective use of space and that stabilize and hold relative control over relations in that space. Sassen relinks the idea of territoriality with politics, the regulation of bodies and populations, however she pushes us to move away from state-centered regard over traditional territories and to focus on the sovereign-making practices that connect spaces together and produce translocal activity. Territoriality can be further expanded through Audra Simpson's notion of indigenous sovereignty, as the political claim over a land and as the affirming right to live as indigenous and to hold indigenous ways of life over land (2014). In sum, to consider the territoriality of an assemblage in political terms and along with indigenous sovereignty has further implications as a political claim over land and life against state dispossession and political elimination (see also Coulthard 2014, Sturm 2017, Wolfe 2016). An indigenous territoriality which has (even modest) sovereign claiming effects implies an constitution of relations over space, which include legally recognized and unrecognized lands and rural and urban spaces, and to focus on indigenous practices of sovereignty that actively traverse and move beyond state recognition (Simpson 2014). Territoriality as a sovereign-making practice enables us to trace indigenous practices that effectively link, inhabit and hold space for indigenous life beyond the rural/urban, virtual/material, recognized/unrecognized divisions of space made by state jurisdictions.

In the opening vignette, a number of elements come together to plan an activity: collecting palm tree leaves from the forest, weaving baskets in a rural community, and organizing in a *barrio* and a school all come together through the interaction between Carlos, his relatives, the teachers and the schoolchildren. Carlos stabilizes all of these elements through the use of his mobile phone. Cultural work that mobile phones enable produces a territoriality that links city and rural communities and produces an indigenous sovereignty over space.

Mobile Phones and Toba People in Buenos Aires

The AMBA is Buenos Aires's urban periphery, a vast formation of suburban rings comprised of a population of 14 million people. In the *barrio*, a space of over 32 families and around 150

people, only two families had a landline telephone. Not even the community center had one. Mobile phones were therefore necessary to coordinate the mobilities of objects, information and people to connect with rural communities in the Chaco, where the urban Toba are originally from – about ten hours by bus and 1,300 kilometers away from the *barrio*. Most of the people in the *barrio* access only sporadic employment as construction, cleaning and maintenance workers. Buying a mobile phone is high on the list of priorities when they get paid.

Mobile phones enable Toba people to stay in touch with families, coordinate mobilities and be less dependent on more public forms of communication used in the past, such as sending messages to radio broadcasting stations in the Chaco. Urban Toba use mobile phones mostly as texting machines, given that voice calls are significantly more expensive and very few have access to internet data plans.[4] During my fieldwork I observed that mobile phones allowed people to get calls about temporary employment opportunities in the city or send and receive information necessary to apply for government welfare subsidies; thus, mobile phones more effectively connect urban Toba with the city on the outskirts of which they live. Through text messages, Toba people coordinate logistics to access government institutions in the city center, which often have long lines and waiting times (see Auyero 2012). In this way, phones alter forms of urban segregation that Toba have experienced since arriving in Buenos Aires and more fluently extend their social networks beyond the confines of the shanty-towns or Toba *barrios* in the urban margins. However, these technologies also re-create forms of exclusion and even introduce new forms.

Cortadera is shaped by a tension between the continuity with and fracture from the surrounding poor neighborhoods around it. The continuity comes from shared infrastructure, social relations between neighbors and their marginal location. Yet, Cortadera is distinguished legally as an indigenous place, as the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs recognizes it as an indigenous community with ownership over the plot of land where the *barrio* is located (and which was a land donation by the Catholic Church). This legal situation "cuts" this Toba space

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[4] During my work in 2009 and 2010, internet (through phones or computers, which were even more rare) was still unreachable. While now some people have some access, data plans are too expensive to provide constant connectivity.

off from the rest of the poor areas of the AMBA. While poor neighborhoods, housing projects and shantytowns in the AMBA generally access state services and welfare through political patronage relations, these are only present in *barrios* whose demographical density make them electorally relevant for political parties' patrons (Auyero 2012). While the *barrio* shares a similar economic position with other urban poor, its residents also access programs specifically targeted to indigenous people that other *barrios* do not.

Toba people I worked with did not always have working phones. Most people owned a phone, but everyone had pay-as-you-go phones that relied on buying credits or phone cards. This meant that, while the people I worked with could always receive texts, they were not always able to reply. If lines were left without credit for too long, they would be disconnected, and after a few months the mobile phone company would then resell that phone number to a new user.

Reactivating phone lines by buying credit was often an immediate priority when people acquired funds. Like Carlos in the opening vignette, other people performing cultural work prioritized having credit when they were coordinating an activity, because it is so important for organizing the logistics of this type of work and not missing opportunities. Younger people in the *barrio* who did not have access to consistent sources of income would often spend many hours sending multiple messages at a time, reconnecting with friends and contacts after reactivating their phone lines. Lack of access to credit made communication intermittent, and everyone was quite aware that others might not reply.

Furthermore, teenagers also appreciated the latest phones with good cameras and loud speakers so they could listen to *reggaeton* while hanging out with friends. In two instances during my work, mobile phones were used as a payment method: a man in his sixties with chronic headache gave a shaman his phone as a payment for curing sessions, and a woman in her twenties sold her phone to an informal vendor because she needed the cash.

While mobile phones have increased the capacity to be in touch with relatives and people in their networks, and thus to perform cultural work for urban Tobas, this technology follows already existing practices of coordinating mobilities. Phones are used among other objects that have organized movement in the past. For example, NGOs and professionals working regularly

in those communities act as messengers, transmitting messages between Toba families orally or carrying small paper notes from places to place.[5] People also used phone centers to coordinate a call or send and receive messages. Most Toba communities have access to radio stations, so people can send messages to a local radio where the message would be broadcast, which made messages public in contrast to the privacy of mobile phones.[6] *El Mensajero,* a Mennonite newspaper published monthly and photocopied at low cost, reaches most Toba communities across the country and is also used as a means of non-urgent communication. These functions have not disappeared completely with the advent of mobile phones and, in many cases, are combined with the use of text messages. Text messages have eased and quickened communication as well as making it more direct; they have diminished the need for the coordination of mobilities to be mediated by others.

Cultural Work: Texting, Mobility and Extending Networks

Like Carlos, Antonia generates an income through cultural work; apart from doing workshops in schools she sells handicrafts in large quantities to shops in the district center, an affluent suburban area. She communicates with these shops through text messages and has a long list of contacts. Unlike Carlos, who sells handicrafts produced in the Chaco by female relatives, Antonia produces them in her home in Cortaderas, as she herself is an experienced *artesana* (handicraft producer). I had assumed that to make the baskets she collected reed leaves in the flooded lowlands around the train tracks or in the undeveloped plots of land that remain rural in the outermost ring of AMBA. However, despite living in the city for over 15 years, Antonia feels unsafe exploring those areas that, unlike the bush in the Chaco, she has no connection to. Instead, she gets the fibers from her mother Julia and her siblings in the Chaco region.

Antonia misses the Chaco, her family, the farm and the forest and texts a family member almost daily. She enjoys coordinating with her mother about sending plant fibers for her

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[5] *Esquelas*, small notes written on folded pieces of paper and given to a person travelling to be handed to another person, include general greetings, notes on family well-being or health problems, and questions regarding family affairs among other things. They can be both pragmatic texts coordinating mobilities or generic greetings.

[6] In houses in the rural Chaco, which many times lack electricity, radios are turned on in the evening during the transmission of messages.

handicrafts, as this allows her to produce the baskets but also to stay connected with the farm. This farm, a half-hour bike ride away from a small town, is remote: it has no electricity or running water, is surrounded by dense forests and marshlands, and has no paved road connecting it to any urban center. When it rains for long periods, the road becomes a field of deep mud and the villages become isolated. During these times, the only infrastructure connecting Julia with urban centers is her mobile phone. She charges its battery regularly in a nearby school and purchases credit in town. When she gets Antonia's requests for fibers, Julia texts her adult children who live close by, but spread across different farms in the area, and asks for help collecting reed leaves in the nearby bushes. Antonia's siblings likewise rely heavily on their phones, and they use them to coordinate daily activities such as taking turns to take cattle to pasture in the bush, bringing packages from town or taking their kids to school. All of them make strategic use of the power in their phones since none of them has electricity in their home. They turn the phone on three times a day only and help take each other's phones to charge at the school.

After collecting the leaves, Julia and her sons bring them to the house, then dry and pack them.[7] A week later, when the leaves are dried, Julia makes cylindrical packages with the fibers and texts one of the sons with a motorcycle to take the heavy packages to the town. The family only sends packages through bus drivers they know well, since other drivers refuse to take the oddly shaped packages that make the bus dirty. Having the contact information of bus drivers and arranging travel times with them – through texting – is the best way to avoid being stuck with the packages for hours at the bus station. Once the shipment is done, Antonia receives, by text, details about where to pick the packages. Antonia explained to me that other women in the *barrio* who produce baskets also get the fibers from relatives in the Chaco.[8] The day I accompanied Antonia to deliver one of the shipments in town, she had coordinated through text messages to get a ride from a group of students and activists who live in downtown Buenos Aires

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[7] I reconstruct these dynamics both through conversations and travelling with Antonia to visit her family.
[8] Every family in the *barrio* in Buenos Aires also takes the opportunity of any relative travelling from Chaco to Buenos Aires to request materials.

and help families in Cortaderas any way they can. During the drive Antonia confessed to me she was happy to get a ride, because she still gets lost in the city.

The movements of fibers and handicrafts, enabled through the use of mobile phones, is central to alternative forms of income generation for urban Toba. This "cultural work" has become available to the Toba in the city, because non-indigenous people recognize them as indigenous and, conversely, the activity validates and reinforces this recognition (Vivaldi 2016). Handicraft production and commercialization, which the mobile phones have enhanced, is therefore a form of marketing indigenous identity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).[9] The use of mobile phones for developing this market is comparable to other micro enterprises and entrepreneurial activities among subaltern groups. As other research has demonstrated, this type of activity has been intensified and motorized with the incorporation of mobile phones, such as in Indian fisheries (Jensen 2007) and informal commercialization in urban Nigeria (Jagun, Heeks and Whalley 2008). Cultural work is part of the informal economies affected by the introduction of personal communication. However, cultural work is particular because it unfolds over two specific dynamics, which emerge and re-create Tobas' indigeneity. First, cultural work requires many existing relations, including family and friendships and second, cultural work extends connections to land and places (city, villages, forest) and produces a new territoriality that reorganizes space. In other words, cultural work is possible because of existing relations between families, bus drivers, and schoolteachers; furthermore, in each instance, the activity creates a specific set of associations that are deeply spatial and reorganize space (for example, the forest, village and road connect with Buenos Aires peripheries, urban schools and the city centre). Understood as assemblage, cultural work as an activity therefore creates a territoriality that brings together elements of different places into new associations.

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[9] This type of work echoes the analysis of Comaroff and Comaroff in *Ethnicity Inc*. (2009) in which they identify the tendency of ethnic identities to be reduced to the commodification of difference. While in Toba's cultural work there is certainly a process of commodification, I consider it reductionist to stop the analysis at this point. As I demonstrate, cultural work generates income and relations that go beyond the exchange, enabling a life in the city and thus reshaping urban space.

Relationalities

Cultural work is possible because Tobas establish strong and lasting relationality both with family members and with friends and collaborators. Antonia's and Julia's coordination unfolded over relations with family, trusted bus drivers, student-activists, and city teachers, which are relations established before and beyond this specific activity. Other ethnographic accounts have demonstrated how mobile phones also reinforce and intensify social networks with family and friends (Horst and Miller 2006, Madianou and Miller 2011). For the Tobas, relations with family precede the use of phones, and the intensification of the communication that texting enables allows for an easier activation of these relations. The use of text communication through mobile phones enables family members and collaborators to stay in touch and maintain active relations even when there is no cultural work activity being planned. Texts also enable effective logistical organization to be set up as soon as there is a need for it and therefore affect the temporality of these relationships. Something that would have previously demanded different stages of communication – tied to the possibilities of people traveling, people acting as messengers and a dependence on radio broadcasting of personal messages – now can be coordinated directly through text messages. Social networks are integral to and precede the economy of the activities: Antonia keeps connected with her family and this turns into an income-generating relation.

Among urban Tobas these forms of relationalities are crucial to create and re-create forms of indigenous life in the city, as is the case for other indigenous people (Peters and Andersen 2013, Ramirez 2007). Texting maintains close family ties and it also makes the coordination of political organizing, communication between communities, and Toba church organizing much easier. When I participated in a church encounter, travelling with a group from a church in the *barrio*, I found text message was the main way in which the preacher organized the trip, including gathering the money to pay for the travel, making arrangements with a charter bus and announcing the place and time of departure. In addition, during the trip, texting was used to coordinate with people traveling in their cars and to get news from those who stayed behind. Likewise, the president of the *barrio*'s association was constantly coordinating meetings through his phone.

While these relations maintain links between people living apart, paradoxically they also create a disconnection between Toba families living together in the city who may be neighbors yet do not stay in touch or work together. Networks are kept apart from each other, as not all families in the *barrio* collaborate with one another. One of the important qualities of these networks is that they maintain difference (such as kinship, participating in church or political associations) and work with difference as their source. These networks connect a multiplicity of forms of being Toba and join them in common activities that make multiplicity productive. So, the multiplicity of Toba experiences is thus reinforced, rather than flattened, in the making of common activities organized through text messages.

Territorialities

A second dimension that emerges out of the coordination of cultural work is the transformation of the relation to place, which is expanded by the activity and produces an emergent territoriality, which even if only temporary produces an indigenous use of space beyond the boundedness of recognized rural and urban territories. The daily and frequent texting to Antonia's mother and siblings connect her, even if indirectly, with a place: the forest and marshlands, the goats, the farm, the muddy roads. Through the messages, Antonia was regularly updated about the state of the forest in the Chaco. She obtained details about slight changes of nature, such as frost changing the texture of the leaves, floods that damaged plants, whether the palm trees have flowered – all of which is relevant information for handicraft production. Antonia, who constantly said she missed the rural village and the forest in the Chaco, reconnects through text messages to the land of the Chaco, her knowledge of fiber collection and the transformations of the forest, marshlands and cattle, from her position in the city. Texting and making of a common activity therefore connects and urban indigenous place with a rural community and transforms both of them.

Relation to land is a constitutive dimension of being indigenous, a condition defined by the dispossession from their territories and the survival, as a people, living in them under a settler colonial power's domain (Wolfe 2016, Simpson 2014). In this sense, indigenous connection to land is not only a memory about a precolonial past, or a strategic deployment of identity. Rather, indigenous existence is always a fundamental challenge to the nation-state's claim to a legitimate

sovereignty over land, which ultimately depends on erasing indigenous history and life to succeed (Simpson 2014, Wolfe 2016, Sturm 2017). While indigenous scholars have been well aware of the fact that this assertion of sovereignty does not imply what Appadurai calls "incarceration over space" (1996), there has been a tendency in anthropology to emphasize the study of spatial relations in places that are always reduced remnants of territories before colonization (for example, Basso 1996). Cultural work as an activity produced from the city challenges a rigid understanding of indigenous relation to land in at least three ways: it goes against ideas of dissolution of indigeneity in the city, it undoes rigid urban/rural divides, and it questions the imagination of indigeneity as a static and rooted form of relating to land. The sending of material for handicrafts creates a relation of continuity between Cortadera, the farm, the forest and its palm trees and leaves. It extends the reach of Antonia's daily life, extends the experience of remote rural villages. Cultural work extends Antonia's reach to rural areas and likewise extends the effects of actions generated in a remote farm to the city.

The connection to rural communities enables a life in the city. Peters and Andersen argue urban indigeneity has been a marginal field of study because hegemonic imaginations consider the city as a space of dissolution of indigenous life and identities, an imagination shared by researchers themselves who have left this area as a site of lesser concern and interest (2013). These imaginations erase both the constitution of indigeneity in the city (the city's indigenization) and the fact that settler cities are on indigenous lands, have been built with indigenous labor and have always been spaces where members of different indigenous nations connect (Peters and Andersen 2013, Ramirez 2007). Texting from the city to stay in touch with rural areas is not only a form of connecting with traditional territories and, in so doing, with an indigenous life that is more "authentic." Rather, it is a way of claiming the settler city as always already indigenous and to connect those places together into the territoriality of cultural work. While this is not a radical land claim action and does not have immediate repercussions over legal recognition, it does create an effective appropriation of space and thus can be regarded as a practice contributing to shaping sovereignty within and beyond indigenous places.

As Sassen has suggested, a notion of territoriality detached from the state enables seeing other forms of organizing space. This activity over space overflows state jurisdictional

definitions of space and the consequent distinctions between urban and rural indigenous people. Cultural work, even if produced through a multiplicity of ways of being Toba, is an active sovereign-making that relies on connection across space and family links, which resonates with the notion of indigenous sovereignty that Audra Simpson suggests is continuous, challenging settler colonialism's structure of dispossession (Simpson 2014: 21). While handicraft production cannot reclaim roads and bus stations, the urban periphery or the city center in their totality, it does effectively unfold indigeneity – if only partially – over these domains. This activity works against the isolation and disconnection Antonia experiences in the city by linking her back to relatives in the Chaco. It also works against the remoteness of the farm in the Chaco, and ultimately it enables Antonia to establish a relation with the city center, even though she gets lost in the city and needs a ride. While connecting back to the Chaco does not solve Tobas' sense of estrangement and their exclusion from the city center, it does offer an alternative if intermittent form of entering and connecting to Buenos Aires. These connections were also precarious, however, in that Antonia did not always have money to charge her phone, she could not make a living out of this activity alone and she felt compelled to stay in the city even when she wanted to live on the farm.

The territoriality created simultaneously enables Antonia to work against her sense of estrangement in the city, to reconnect to the rural communities she is from and to access the city as an indigenous person. It ultimately creates a new territoriality though the several links that are established – a territoriality that indigenizes the city by making it accessible to family relations, palm tree leaves and handicrafts production as much as it enfolds the city in this larger activity of a Toba cultural work.

Information Mobilities and State Agencies

Marcelo is a musician in his mid-forties who has five children born in the Chaco. While he gets paid for performing, he still struggles financially. At the beginning of the school year, he requested a subsidy from the local social worker to buy school supplies for his children, and this brought up the fact that several of his children had no national ID. This ID is a universal document, mandatory for all Argentinean citizens, that grants access to citizenship status and

state services. The social worker was alarmed when, upon requesting the children's birth certificate, Marcelo explained that they didn't have any because they were born in rural Chaco and were never registered.

From that point, Marcelo dealt with a complicated series of bureaucratic procedures. He had no money to travel back to the Chaco for document registration, so he instead bought phone credit and started to text family members there to ask if they could make inquiries at the different institutions. His cousins offered to go to the health center in the town where he used to live to find out if they had records of his children's births. But after several visits and several back-and-forth messages, including the details of the children's dates and places of birth, no registry of birth was found. Marcelo's wife Rosa then contacted her family and found out that the health center where she had given birth had closed and the records could not be found. Having an ID is a basic right for any person in Argentina who is born in a hospital, regardless of social class. While the texts made it easier for Marcelo to find out about the non-existence of the registry and therefore move the procedure one step forward, the experience of being excluded from the basic right of having an ID was not alleviated with the use of the phone. State negligence toward record keeping in health centers that serve indigenous people has not been modified with the incorporation of the new technology of mobile phones.

A few months later, after the social worker became convinced there was no chance to get the birth certificates, she started looking for an exemption to the requirement of the certificate and texted Marcelo to request information from him. During my research period, Marcelo was not able to obtain the IDs for his children but he expected the social worker find a way around it.[10] In Marcelo's experience text messages were, once more, central for the movement of information between the *barrio* in Buenos Aires, a small city in the Chaco, and a rural community near the city, as well between the *barrio* and the social worker in downtown Buenos

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[10] Marcelo avoided direct answers when I asked how he had managed to get by for so long without ID, which I infer to mean that the school and health stations had made an exception in serving children with no ID. The president of the neighborhood association showed his surprise and concern about the situation of Marcelo, but soon other people in the *barrio* voiced that they were also lacking their children's ID.

Aires. However, this relatively easier access to information did not undo the fact that records were never made, or were lost.

This vignette describes the difficulties of accessing state institutions, which is common for most people in the *barrio* and for Toba people in the Chaco as well. The difficulty is a result of several dynamics, including the mediation of and dependence on patronage relations in the Chaco (Iñigo Carrera 2013), systemic forms of exclusion by state administrators and workers (for the educational system, see Hecht 2012) and fundamental limitations such as the illiteracy rate among Toba adults. Other research has documented the exclusion of Toba people from the basic right of having an ID (Carrasco and ACA 2000, Gordillo 2006). The difficulty of accessing an ID and requesting state services and assistance is therefore another symptom of the precarious and ambiguous position of Toba and other indigenous peoples within the nation-state and as citizens.

Tobas' experience with state institutions is very much in line with what Javier Auyero (2012) has found in his ethnography of waiting at state offices in Buenos Aires and the role of this experience in shaping the urban poor's larger political position and relations with the state. Waiting, the uncertainty about the results of the waiting and the arbitrariness of bureaucratic procedures reproduces the very subordination that excludes urban poor from political rights in the first place. Waiting for hours and days to receive state assistance bars that person from continuing with their life and search for work. More significantly, the always-deferred access to services and assistance is a direct denial of political rights, what Auyero calls the condition of being a denizen (in contrast to a citizen). Marcelo and most of the families I talked to had these experiences at state institutions, and this is one of the reasons why he had given up in his attempt to obtain birth certificates.[11] In addition to Auyero' s insight, I observed that it is not only the condition of being poor but also the racialization of relations that generates this disconnect. In state offices, I observed how people from the *barrio* were asked "where are you from" despite

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[11] Marcelo's father Marcos had a similar experience in his attempt to obtain an ID, after having his stolen. In his case, he did not have a phone to coordinate the request of information, so he did all inquiries in person. I accompanied him to two state offices where he had this experience of waiting and uncertainty.

being citizens and indigenous to the land, given basic explanations with infantilizing tones and scolded by state bureaucrats.

Just as Antonia's experience of being lost in the city was not undone by the use of the phone, exclusion from the registry was not alleviated by Marcelo's use of his phone. Mobile communication did, however, partially aid access to information. It saved Marcelo from having to travel to Chaco since he could make use of his family relations to inquire about documents on his behalf. This connection is dependent on the possibility of activating forms of mobility between the two.

Getting mediated access to institutions in the Chaco, even if the problem was not solved, allowed him to keep making inquiries and to have solid explanations for why he could not obtain a birth certificate. Communicating this information to the social worker allowed this bureaucratic procedure to move one step further. Yet, full access to the institution and the basic right to identification were still limited by structural dynamics that exclude Toba people from state institutions and from access to the city. The waiting and the uncertainty about the procedure are not interrupted; the paternalistic scolding of government workers cannot be changed, but in other circumstances Marcelo would have given up earlier, have undocumented children, and take on the precarious condition in the city implied by not having an ID. Text communication, therefore, joins urban and rural Toba and enables a form of activity that is neither rural nor urban, but both. Messages themselves become what Horst and Taylor (2014) call "proxies of mobility." They can replace actual travel and perform actions of mobility on behalf of the people activating them. The connectivity cellphones enable create an extended reach over space for Marcelo. Communications saved Marcelo from actually having to pay a bus ticket to Chaco to make the inquiry himself.

In other moments, for example when Marcelo's father Ricardo traveled from Buenos Aires to Chaco, I saw how he used his trip to carry documents and inquire about other people's paperwork, including the Toba evangelical church, which needed to renew the religious registry every year. Text messages were still used in these instances to coordinate the sending of forms, certificates and legal documents from one place to another, turning the traveler into a courier of important documents on behalf of others. This is another example of how mobile phones

generate mobilities within Toba networks, and while they did not undo the forms of exclusion, they enabled faster and easier communications.

In this situation, the mobility of information is also part of the extended territoriality that connects Toba to rural and urban places. This extended territoriality unfolds through family relations but also overflows them by creating new capacities for people living in the city and in rural areas. Mobilities are activated from and in tension with the Tobas' subaltern position as racialized, poor and indigenous people living in Buenos Aires, transforming people's possibilities and extending the places in which they are located.

These uses of phones have been observed in other subaltern and migrant populations (Horst and Taylor 2014). However, what is specific about this case is that the use of phones enhances the income-generating capacities of urban indigenous people and opens the possibility of linking fragmented indigenous places to create an emergent territoriality. Beyond the structural forms of exclusion that texting and mobile phone communication are unable to undo, there is another dimension of disconnection that phones specifically generate when they break down.

Mobile phones are a quite recent incorporation. They are not linked to other technologies that might constitute infrastructures of mobility, such as landlines or PCs connected to the internet, since urban subaltern populations in Argentina have never participated in these technologies. For the middle class an experience of a lost or broken mobile phone is never synonymous with isolation, but for Tobas (as for most subaltern groups in the Global South) mobile phones are the only available communication device. The breaking of a phone, therefore, has profound disconnecting effects for urban Toba after they have adopted this technology.

Broken phones, networks and territorialities

If we go back to the sense of loss that Carlos expressed in the opening vignette when his phone broke down, we can now understand it as a disconnection from social networks with an impact on the spatialities of these networks. When I asked if he had attempted to repair the broken phone, Carlos explained that if you took a broken phone to repair you had to pay for the service

even if the phone was unfixable, and consequently most people found it risky to spend money trying to fix a phone. I was surprised to find these experiences were common among other families in the *barrio*. I later experienced being disconnected from research collaborators for some periods of time when I texted them and found that somebody new owned that number. Carlos' experience of losing his phone was also shared by Marcelo, Antonia and other people engaged in cultural work. In different degrees they have all experienced a loss of information when a phone breaks or is lost. Because of this, Ricardo kept a paper agenda as a separate record of phone numbers and addresses.

In addition to the impossibility of repairing the phones, the loss of information when a mobile phone broke was a result of the use of these technologies in isolation from other technologies and infrastructures. Adults and young adults in the *barrio* who own a mobile phone mostly have no access to landlines (only 2 families out of 42 have one), and thus they could not reconnect with their contacts through a direct phone call. In addition, families in the *barrio* had no access to backing up information because only a few people in the *barrio* owned personal computers and they could manage only basic functions. None of the people I worked with knew how to back up information from their phones.

A final reason that information is lost when a phone breaks is the difficulty that a racialized, poor, indigenous people have in navigating the bureaucracies of communication companies. When I asked Julio, a man in his fifties who was very engaged in cultural work, about his experience attempting to recover his mobile phone connection, he explained that it was impossible to get assistance from the phone companies. He had attempted once to keep his old phone number after his phone was stolen and got very frustrated. He narrated that, after a morning of waiting, being sent back and forth to talk with different officials, and getting his national ID photocopied, he was told that it had been too long and that his phone number did not belong to him anymore. Feeling both frustrated and disempowered, he never attempted to regain his phone number again.

The problem of lack of access to communication technologies among marginalized populations has been the subject of much research in the development literature, creating the notion of the digital divide (see Norris 2001, Warschauer 2004) – that is, socioeconomic

disparities generated by differentiated access to digital technologies. More recently, studies have focused on situations where there is not such a clear division between access and non-access but a range of (access possibilities that push low-income groups to develop strategies for connectivity (de Souza e Silva et al 2011).

Obstacles to full access to technology have been highlighted in the work of de Souza e Silva (2011). They examine the legal and illegal strategies that *favela* dwellers in Rio de Janeiro deploy to maintain access to mobile phone service given the social and financial challenges they confront to keep their mobile phones connected. Donner, in recent research on the internet-after-access moment, examines how low-income people in the Global South confront ongoing limitations to access, despite the ubiquity of mobile phones with the capability of connectivity (2015).[12] Following de Souza e Silva and Donner, rather than asking whether people have access or not, I look at how the use of phones confronts urban Toba with the spatial effects of losing information contained in a mobile phone. The loss of contact information in a phone had profound implications for the larger possibilities of linking of urban and rural places and people, and handicraft material.

Antonia explained that, when she lost her phone, she had to rebuild her network by recovering phone numbers one by one. While it was relatively easy to recover Toba relatives and friends' contact information, the possibilities of reconnecting with collaborators from the middle class or with institutions and shops was much harder. She lost much of the contact information of handicraft buyers, schools and collaborators who helped her sell handicrafts. This difference, unsurprisingly, reflects the different strengths of the links in her social network, but interestingly it also deeply affected her access to the city. Antonia explained that, despite living in the city for over twenty years, she still gets lost in many areas. Thus, she was not able to physically return to the houses of people or the shops she used to access with her phone. While she was able to

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[12] Molony 2006 studies the barriers accessing information through the use of mobile phones among Tanzanian farmers. He highlights the way mobile phones are not seen as reliable and thus do *not* transform previous relations between agricultural producers and their buyers. Producers are still unable to access market information and to have a broader room for price negotiation in spite of having access to mobile phones that were expected to facilitate and empower farmers through access to information.

reconnect with her family in the Chaco, and in this sense link back to an indigenous network, she permanently lost information that connected her to her contacts in the city center.

Thus, the disconnection to the Chaco was never permanent. These relations within Toba networks were re-created after some time with the help of other friends and family in the *barrio*. In this case, old forms of connecting were also activated as people continued to be in touch through paper messages, radio announcements or the church newsletter.

This is similar to the findings of Horst and Miller (2006), who identify the creation and maintenance of social networks as the primary use of mobile phones among low-income Jamaicans, where phones do not create completely new forms of communication but are incorporated into previous practices that continue to be used. Similarly, Toba are able to move back and forth between these forms of communication, particularly when a phone is lost. The chance to reconnect relatively easily with families and fellow church members is an indication of the deeper links that establish these relations – these networks pre-existed the mobile phones, although the phones did intensify them (see Horst and Miller 2006).

However, the contacts with schools, shops buying their handicrafts, fair organizers and more people from the middle class who collaborated with them were, in many cases, lost completely. Of course, this contact could be re-established if the collaborators visited the *barrio*, but this was not always the case. These weaker and uncertain links had to be re-established from scratch in many occasions. Losing the contacts of collaborators therefore implied both a social and a spatial disconnection from the city center. Schools and other collaborators from the middle class were social relations enabling cultural work, aiding access to state institutions and literally orienting Tobas' movements in the city center; these connections provided them literal spatial access to schools and shops and gave them direction in the city. Without connections in the city, their whole experience of accessing the city center and moving through it was transformed. The division within the AMBA between dwellings of middle class, poor areas and the circumscribed location of the *barrio* as indigenous gets re-inscribed in the disconnections of mobile phones, and a sense of isolation is intensified as a result of this loss.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown how the disconnection of phones is not only a loss in the circulation of information but also a deeply spatial and social one – it implies a restriction of access to the city and to non-Toba people. The connections that mobile phones also enable (re-)create links to land back in the Chaco and form an extended territoriality for the Toba.

These uses of mobile phones facilitate ways of indigenizing the city space beyond the location of a *barrio* alone, and their enabling of cultural work also transforms the rural Toba communities in the Chaco as places with direct links to the city. While Toba indigeneity is made in the relations with their traditional territories in the Chaco region, in Buenos Aires Toba people generate new forms of being indigenous in the urban space by claiming the city as a place constituted by and constitutive of indigenous histories (Peters and Andersen 2013, Ramirez 2007). More significantly, these links and the spatial mobility they enable constitute an emergent territoriality that results from the networks of relations and that brings different places and different Toba experiences together. This territoriality is not so much about having a direct power, a sovereign control over a place; rather it is made through the productive generation of relations and life over places. It is about occupying space through practice and social relations.

Toba territorialities need to be continually reshaped, as they are easily disconnected. Even while mobile phones facilitate the making of these networks, the connections between places are maintained effortfully. Connections and mobilities bring people together, but they are generated through several frictions (Tsing 2004, Vivaldi 2011). These are not only obstacles; they have profound disconnecting effects over the extension of territorialities and are another way in which lack of access to urban space and relations is part of socioeconomic and political forms of exclusion. This is a topic that demands further consideration as indigenous people incorporate technologies and as technologies affect a fundamental dimension of indigenous peoples' experience: the relation to land.

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