IMAGINING THE MAPOCHO RIVER:

Borderlands, Heterotopia, and Marginality in Santiago's Modernisation[1]

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how Santiago's modernisation – specifically, the channelling of the Mapocho River under Vicuña Mackenna's rule – transformed the river's role in the city's collective imagination, how it evolved from being perceived as a simple waterway to a border and heterotopic space, deeply intertwined with the city's socio-spatial fabric. Using Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, the political narratives surrounding Santiago's modernisation and their spatial impacts are analysed through the lens of the novel *El Río* by Alfredo Gómez Morel. The research traces the development of fluvial imaginaries that shaped the Mapocho River in the early 20th century, incorporating urban, social, and environmental changes at the century's turn. As a result, the river emerges not only as a geographical feature but also as a symbolic space, rich with meanings that have been influenced by Santiago's shifting social and cultural needs. Ultimately, the study explores how these representations contributed to the Mapocho's material and imaginary construction, creating a dynamic interplay between the river and its evolving context.

KEYWORDS: Fluvial imaginaries; Mapocho river; borderland; heterotopia; marginality

Introduction

Since the beginnings of civilisation, rivers have been interpreted as dividing lines that separate the land and split it into two. The etymology of the word *river* in its various translations, such as *río* in Spanish or *rivière* in French, reveals a deeply rooted connection with the idea of boundaries and divisions. These terms derive from the Proto-Indo-European word *reyp*, meaning to scratch, tear, or cut. This etymological notion adds a deeper dimension to our understanding of how rivers have been conceived as natural borders and how this perception has evolved over time. However, the idea of rivers as simple dividing lines does not fully capture their complexity in shaping human experiences and urban landscapes, especially when viewed through historical and cultural lenses.

Since its foundation in 1541, Santiago de Chile has maintained a complex and paradoxical relationship with its river, the Mapocho (Figure 1). While the river was crucial for the city's survival, it soon acquired the status of a border serving as the northern limit of the foundational city and separating it from the ultra-Mapocho lands known as La Chimba. This spatial division was accentuated by the river's erratic behaviour: a narrow stream during the

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dry months, it transformed into a destructive torrent during the rainy season, earning the title of "the scourge of Santiago" (Vicuña Mackenna, 1872, p. 254). Thus, from early on, the Mapocho played a dual role: a central urban feature that simultaneously served as a social and spatial limit. However, this notion of the river as a boundary has been fluid, evolving over time. Initially seen as a natural border, the Mapocho later emerged as a social frontier and, by the 20th century, became synonymous with marginality. These shifting perceptions are reflected in what this article defines as *fluvial imaginaries* – the collective representations of the river in the material, visual, and literary culture of Santiago.
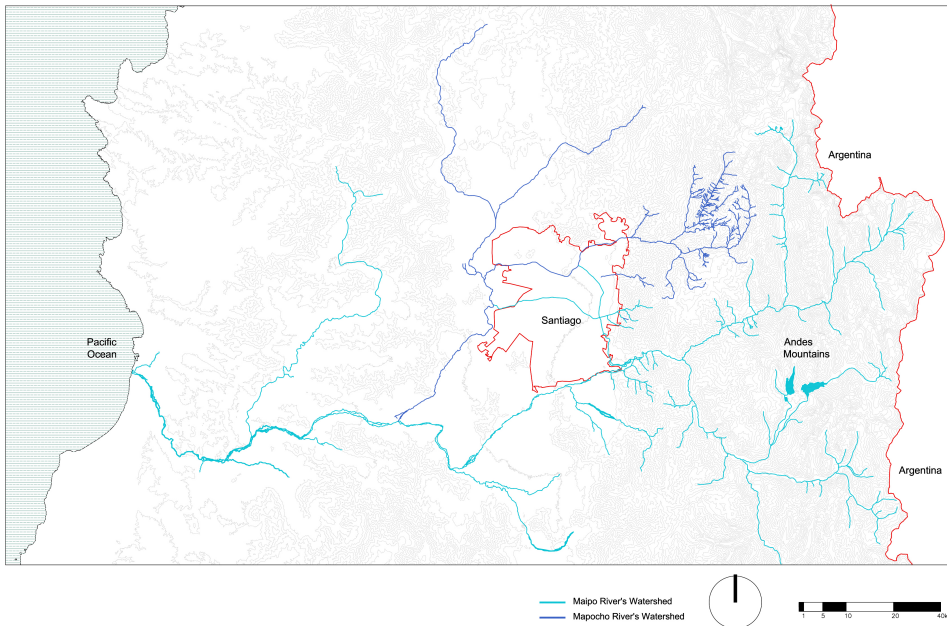

Figure 1 – Map of the Mapocho and surrounding region. In dark blue the Mapocho's watershed and in light blue the Maipo's watershed.

The concept of fluvial imaginaries refers to the ways in which rivers are represented and understood through the discourses, narratives, and symbols embedded in a community's cultural production. As Cornelius Castoriadis, (1997 [1975]) noted, the interrelationship between world-image and self-image is crucial, given that they are inherently connected (p. 149). Fluvial imaginaries, therefore, not only reflect the river's role in the spatial and social fabric of a city but also shape the way the city itself is perceived and lived by its inhabitants. Examining the Mapocho's fluvial imaginaries provides a lens through which to explore the historical, social, and environmental impact of urban transformations, revealing the intertwined narratives of space, memory, and power. As Pettinaroli and Mutis (2013) argue, the river in Latin American cultural production often functions as "a discursive site of scrutiny, debate, and transgression" (p. 12). By employing a multidisciplinary approach, that combines historical analysis, spatial theory and cultural studies, this article investigates how the Mapocho's fluvial imaginaries have evolved from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. This methodology includes geocritical analysis of historical urban planning documents, literary texts, and other artistic representations to trace how the river's physical and symbolic roles have transformed over time. By drawing on Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) concept of "border" and Michel Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" the research conceives

the Mapocho as a fluid border space where utopian aspirations and heterotopic distortions coexist. Through an examination of Vicuña Mackenna's urban project *La Transformación de Santiago* (1872), the novel *El Río* (1962) by Alfredo Gómez Morel, and other visual and literary sources, the article reveals how the Mapocho's shifting representations moved from being a 'perceived boundary' between Santiago and La Chimba to a 'conceived border space' in urban planning discourse, and finally to a "lived heterotopic space" marked by marginality in cultural narratives.

This research argues that understanding the Mapocho's fluvial imaginaries requires engaging with what Soja (1996) calls the triple dimension of human life: spatiality, historicality and sociality. These dimensions connect the river's material presence with its symbolic and social functions, providing a framework for studying how the river is *perceived* (material and environmental conditions), *conceived* (represented and imagined), and *lived* (socially constructed through use and experience) (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]). Thus, analysing the Mapocho's transformation from a natural border to a heterotopic and marginal space unveils the complex relationship between memory, politics, and the shaping of urban imaginaries. By examining these distinct historical moments, the study reveals how the Mapocho's fluvial imaginaries are tied to broader social, cultural, and political transformations. This approach highlights the role of fluvial imaginaries as tools for articulating power relations and contesting spatial orders, suggesting that the study of rivers can offer new insights into the dynamics of urban identity and territoriality. Furthermore, by considering how perceptions of rivers are shaped by "social and economic needs, ecological values, aesthetics preferences, and national identities" (Mauch & Zeller, 2008, p. 7), the research highlights the importance of river-city relationships in shaping urban landscapes and collective memories. Ultimately, since rivers are such an essential resource for almost all larger cities, the study of the relationship river-city through the lens of imagination provides an angle from which to advance urban history with a focus on the dynamics that define the urban landscape. By focusing on the Mapocho, this research reveals how an understanding of fluvial imaginaries can deepen our knowledge of the symbolic power of rivers in constructing, contesting, and redefining urban spaces.

Fluvial imaginaries as a methodology

Fluvial imaginaries will be understood as a discursive tool of analysis that is part of geocriticism. Geocriticism, as a methodology belonging to the so-called 'spatial turn' in humanities, primarily focuses on how "spaces and places are perceived, represented, and ultimately used" (Tally Jr & Battista, 2016, p. 2). This approach emphasises the spatial dimensions of texts and other representations, considering how settings, locations, and environments influence the themes, characters, and events within a narrative. Geocriticism goes beyond simple descriptions of physical spaces and delves into the symbolic, social, and cultural meanings associated with these spaces. In this context, fluvial imaginaries recognise that rivers are not merely neutral backdrops; rather, they actively shape and are shaped by human experiences, relationships, and power dynamics. Rivers, as subjects of critical studies, highly exemplify the dual nature of fluvial spaces: they are simultaneously physical entities and symbolic constructs, reflecting complex interrelations between nature and culture. Consequently, fluvial imaginaries follow the geocritical principle that suggests representations of a given space function as maps that "figuratively project, describe, and map the social spaces represented and, in a sense, created on its pages... allowing readers to orient themselves along with the characters, events, settings, and ideas of the novel in the world"(Tally Jr, 2019, p. 95).

This idea aligns with Lefebvre's ideas of space being more than an empty container but a social product that "can be decoded, it can be *read*"(1991 (1974), p. 17). Lefebvre argues that the creation of space involves a process of signification that is deeply historical, based on modes of production, and susceptible to conflictive processes (p.31). Therefore, fluvial imaginaries will be specific to each society in a given space-time, reflecting the tensions, aspirations, and transformations that define its historical moment. Furthermore, the discursive analysis of fluvial imaginaries draws on Soja's (1996) concept of *Thirdspace*, which challenges the binary understanding of real or imagined space by proposing a more dynamic perspective. Thirdspace encompasses lived experiences, social relationships, and symbolic representations that shapes our understanding of space. It recognises that spaces are not simply objective or subjective but are co-constructed through material and imaginative processes. This conceptual framework allows for an analysis that integrates the physical landscape (*firstspace*), mental representations (*secondspace*), and lived experiences (*thirdspace*), highlighting how spaces are continuously negotiated and reimagined.

By incorporating Soja's notion of the "real-and-imagined", fluvial imaginaries become a powerful tool for exploring the complex interplay between the tangible and the symbolic, the material and the cultural. This methodology, which emerges from geocritical principles and the ideas of Lefebvre and Soja regarding space, allows for a richer analysis of how fluvial imaginaries function within cultural discourses and how rivers function as dynamic spaces of power, identity, and transformation within the broader urban context. In this sense, analysing fluvial imaginaries becomes a way of tracing how spatial narratives both represent and influence broader social and political processes. The river, therefore, serves as a site where multiple imaginaries intersect, producing a layered understanding of the urban landscape.

Of borders and heterotopias

In *Of Other Spaces* (1986), Michel Foucault defined heterotopia, categorically distinguishing it from utopia, which he defined as "sites with no real place" (p. 24), recognisable for being inherently impossible. As soon as utopias begin to materialise, they cease to be utopias – in terms of idealisations – acquiring dystopian qualities. Likewise, Foucault defines heterotopias as "real places" (p. 24). In this sense, utopias are the desire to start everything anew, to begin from scratch, to abolish existing systems and produce something new and perfect while heterotopias already exist, are located within power systems, are disorderly, concrete, and inseparable from other real spaces (Elliot, 2020, p. 36). As such, heterotopias are described as places that oppose hegemonic discourses, where "human relationships deviate from what is conventionally considered normal" (Vilches, 2016, p. 12).

Two central elements in the concept of heterotopia, therefore, are the notions of power and normality. According to Foucault, in its modern form, power is increasingly exercised not within the domain of law, but within the realm of norms. Rather than merely repressing an already established individuality or nature, power actively constitutes and shapes it through norms that serve as both a reference and a measure (Foucault, 2003). The norm operates by referring to individuals' actions and behaviours within a domain that serves as a benchmark, providing a point of comparison and a rule to follow – essentially, the average or ideal conduct. It differentiates individuals based on this domain, treating it as a threshold or optimal point to be achieved. By measuring individuals' capabilities in quantitative terms and hierarchising them in terms of value, the norm imposes a conformity that seeks to

homogenise behaviours and practices. In this sense, the heterotopia is the space of the abnormal, where 'normal' values are subverted.

Based on this, Foucault determines six principles to define heterotopias. Firstly, the creation of heterotopias is a constant in all human groups, who throughout history can assign different functions to the same heterotopic space. Additionally, heterotopias emerge among individuals who experience an "absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 1986, p. 26) and present themselves as open spaces with mechanisms of exclusion, "either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications" (p. 26). Heterotopias also offer a temporal world that harbours "several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (p. 25), often providing an inversion of the meaning of a given space, creating a parallel space, an 'Other' space where life is more organised than in everyday confusion or exposing deep divisions within a specific power system. According to the last principle, heterotopias are places that relate to all other places in a society but "questioning them, inverting them and, therefore, distancing themselves from them. However, and although it sounds paradoxical, they cannot exist without them" (Vilches, 2016, p. 13).

From this definition, the concept of the border is closely related to that of heterotopia. Firstly, talking about a border always leads to talking about identity, and hence about othering. As Jonathan Rutherford (1990)defines, identities are formed in the presence of polarities. That is, the identity-forming process requires an 'Other' from which we differentiate ourselves, another that presents itself as an opposite. In this sense, Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the border is relevant, as she argues that "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" (p. 3). Anzaldúa proposes a definition that expands the idea of the border, no longer as a dividing line but as a border space, which has thickness and depth and is not just a contact zone between two cultures but has its own identity: it is another place. Referring to the thousands of Mexicans trying to cross the border into the United States, Anzaldúa focuses on cultural borders where two worlds merge, giving rise to "a border culture, a third country, a closed country" (1987, p. 11). This relates to the idea of a third space proposed by Homi Bhabha (1990), which links the liminal or hybrid space between two entities with the emergence of a third, which "displaces the histories that constitute it and establishes new structures of authority, new political initiatives" (p. 221).

A crucial concept that adds a fundamental nuance to the exploration of the duality of the Mapocho as a border space and heterotopia is that of marginality. Marginality, as a concept, emerged in the 1960s to define certain phenomena of inequality, precarity, and poverty in cities as consequences of urban development and industrialisation processes. Marginality can be defined as the situation in which "an individual or a group is placed outside the decision-making structures [and] implies that some cultural, psychological, or bodily trait is deemed to be of lesser value than the 'norm'" (Geraghty & Massilda, 2019, p. 2). This definition refers to a centre, understood as power or as the symbolic space of power, and a periphery. Emilie Doré explains that although the term marginality alludes to a phenomenon that is "beside" or "apart" from this centre, it is "constantly interacting with the rest of society, and this interaction defines marginality" (2008, p. 84). Carvancho, however, emphasises that this power relationship between the centre and the periphery does not mean the subordination of the margin. The margin constructs its own discourses, often invisible to the centre, but it has a voice. This "makes the perspective area of the object of study identical to the official one but from different 'positions.' Not from 'above' to 'below,' but 'face to face'" (Carvancho, 2016, p. 42). In this sense, the concept of marginality

ties together the ideas of the border and heterotopia because, as Anzaldúa (1987) argues, those who inhabit borders are individuals who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.' Foucault describes heterotopias as places that deviate human relations from what is commonly considered normal; therefore, we will understand the notions of the border and marginal space as heterotopias that challenge dominant structures and allow the construction of alternative realities.

The conceived Mapocho: The border

Historically, the Mapocho has been conceived and imagined as a natural and cultural border within the urban landscape of Santiago. As early as the 16th century, historical records suggest that Pedro de Valdivia, following the orders of King Carlos V, identified the river as the northern limit of the colonial city. The Chimba neighbourhood, situated north of the river, was primarily populated by "indigenous servants, artisans, and groups of black slaves and mestizos"(Alvarez, 2011, p. 25). This established the river as a dividing boundary, creating a stark contrast between the two riverbanks. Simón Castillo noted that living in the Chimba was perceived by residents of the historic centre as residing in "another" city (Castillo, 2014, p. 65). Seasonal floods further isolated the Chimba, limiting interaction between residents of the two sides, as described by Justo Abel Rosales (1887): "Friends from one side or the other only saw each other by chance... and bid farewell not to greet each other until at least October" (p. 30).

Efforts to control the river began in the early 18th century, with the construction of *tajamares* (embankments - Figure 2) designed to contain floods and provide public promenades that connected the city. Castillo (2014) noted that these promenades were among the most important public spaces in the city, being depicted in literature and the arts until their partial destruction in 1783. In the late 19th century, Santiago underwent significant urban transformations, which were accompanied by a series of changes within Chilean society. According to de Ramón (2000), urban transformations were largely due to foreign influences on the affluent classes, given both the immigration of foreigners from the beginning of the century – who were directly related to the ruling class, participating in business management and positions of power – and through the trips that the wealthiest families made to Europe. With the arrival of new trends, especially European and North American, the country embarked on a process of capitalist modernisation rooted in the industrialisation of the economy and foreign capital investment. This early modernisation brought about significant changes in the city of Santiago, which experienced considerable population growth due to high migration from rural areas to the city (de Ramón, 2000). With the increase in population, informal settlements on the banks of the Mapocho grew in size and density. Due to the changing nature of the river, the lands adjacent to its banks were more affordable compared to other urban areas. This attracted popular groups that established homes and engaged in sand and gravel extraction. These riverside settlements arose not only due to the accessibility of the land but also in response to migration dynamics and the lack of housing options. The precarious dwellings in these settlements, made of cheap materials such as adobe and straw, reflected the pronounced inequality between both sides of the river in a context of rapid urban growth. From the 1860s onwards, these shantytowns began to congregate, forming a visible manifestation of marginality that grew over time, causing great concern among the Santiago elite that longed for a bourgeois, modern and European city.
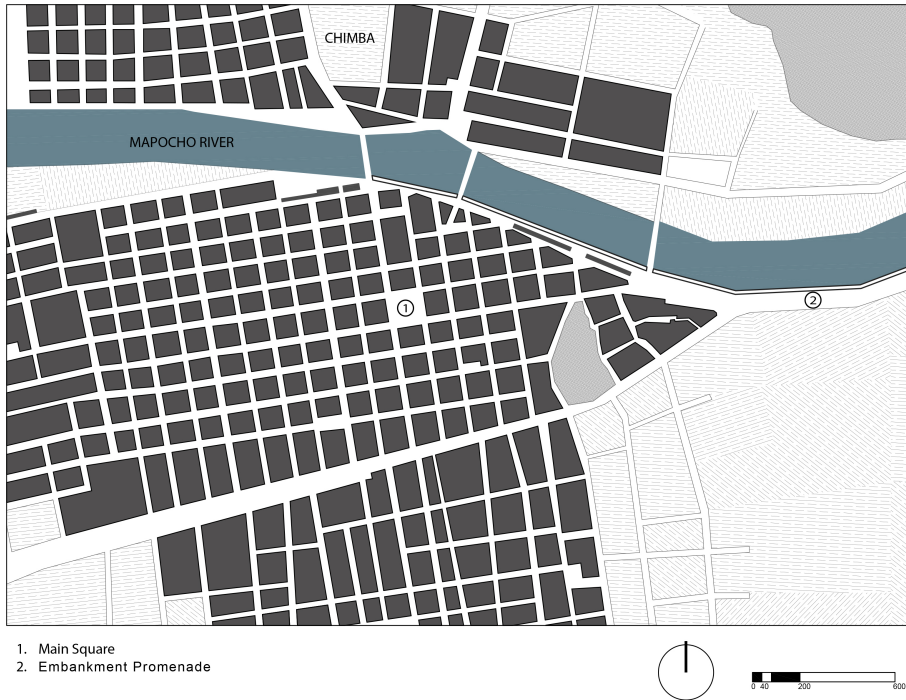
1. Main Square
2. Embankment Promenade

Figure 2 - Santiago in the 19th century (Map by the author, based on Thomas Fabregas's 1863 map.)

By the end of the 19th century, however, the river was increasingly viewed as an obstacle to urban development and modernisation. One of the intellectuals of the Santiago oligarchy who critically addressed the gap between the utopian imaginary of modernity and the reality of the Chilean capital was Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna. Like many other members of high society, Vicuña Mackenna travelled to Europe and the United States, where he forged his ideas and projects for the "civilisation" of his country. In 1872, by then the city's mayor, he referred to the areas on the north bank of the Mapocho as an "immense African camp where the filthy shack has replaced the airy tent of the barbarians" and as an "immense sewer of infection and vice, of crime and plague, a true 'death paddock'" (Vicuña Mackenna, 1872, pp. 22-23), which he considered "barbaric" in opposition to the "enlightened, opulent, and Christian" centre, or as he called it, the "proper city". Influenced by the hygienist ideas of the time, the mayor saw the river and its banks as a threat, and its inhabitants were associated with immorality, vice, and diseases. This vision clashed with the republican and modern ideals that the elites wished to project. Therefore, the mayor based his vision on Haussmann's Paris transformation project – presented to the congress his plan called *La Transformación de Santiago* ('The transformation of Santiago'), in which the city was understood as a large organism where health was ensured through social development, and therefore, disease was anything that threatened this. This plan implied a process that, "before modernising and reforming the city, imitating the great European cities, it was necessary to eradicate certain forms of life and habitat that were contrary to the model of the modern and civilised city" (Leyton & Huertas, 2012, p. 31). The transformation of Santiago then contemplated reforming the image of the river through its channelling, the removal of shantytowns on the banks, the creation of new public spaces, as well as the construction of public buildings for order and health, such as the jail on the south bank and

the Institute of Hygiene on the north bank. Therefore, the transformation and channelling of the river not only sought to control the waters and environmental safety but also a new relationship between the urban environment and its inhabitants. This vision significantly influenced how the Mapocho would be understood and represented, marking the beginning of an urban transformation that would go beyond the mere physical channelling of the riverbed.

While Vicuña Mackenna was the first to propose the river's channelling, the project was carried out several years after his term as mayor ended. However, his ideas were replicated by those who came after him, especially those related to the Mapocho and the Chimba. Valentín Martínez, for example, the engineer in charge of the channelling project, referred to the Mapocho as "a pestilent and dirty zone" that should disappear, to become "an artery of health and an attractive promenade" (in Castillo, 2014, p. 95). These imaginaries align with the modernising ideals and hygienist discourses from Europe at the end of the century, which saw in the Mapocho what Castillo calls a triple tension: marginality, impurity, and excretion, "where the unfortunate is embodied not so much in adverse nature but in the body and housing of the poor" (Castillo, 2014, p. 91). These words clearly evidence the shift in focus in the perception of the Mapocho. The channelling of the Mapocho not only altered its physical course but also triggered changes in societal perceptions of the river, reinforcing the notion of the river as a social margin and reflecting the city's internal divisions and struggles for power, space, and identity. Mary Douglas' theory of margins is particularly useful for understanding the symbolic significance of the Mapocho River within Santiago's urban landscape. According to Douglas (2002 [1966]), "any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins" (p. 150) Margins represent both physical and social threats to the established order, and the river came to embody this vulnerability. Adrian Forty's (1995 [1986]) discussion of hygiene as an allegory of warfare provides further insight into the elite's reaction to the marginal spaces. He argues that, during times of rapid social change, such as the rise of the working class's political power, the middle class grew obsessed with cleanliness. The Mapocho, as a marginal space, became dangerous in the eyes of Santiago's elite. Consequently, the river and its inhabitants – associated with immorality, vice, and disease – became seen as allies of illness, threatening the social body of the city.

In this context, the urban transformations associated with the river not only changed the city's relationship with the river but also reinforced the socioeconomic and cultural divisions present in society. What was once a river to contain and dominate was now a social threat that needed to be educated and civilised. It is not surprising, then, that the river itself is the space that challenges the utopian ideal of the Chilean elite by shaping itself as a marginal landscape. Although the river's channelling achieved the long-desired connection between the city and the Chimba, the neighbourhoods near the river in the western part of the train station acquired a worse reputation due to crime and urban poverty experienced in those areas. The transformation of the Mapocho River from a natural boundary to a marginal space reflects the evolution of the city itself and its sociocultural dynamics. The perception of the river as a border, previously used to distinguish between the 'proper city' and the Chimba, evolves towards a more complex conception. The channelling of the river not only changed its physical course but also triggered changes in how society interacted with it. The Mapocho was no longer simply a geographic barrier; it became a reflection of the city's internal divisions and the struggle for power, space, and identity. This process of transformation and marginalisation of the Mapocho River marked the complex relationship between modernisation, urban identity, and social tensions in Chilean society.

The lived Mapocho: the heterotopia

Referring to Lefebvre's trialectics of space, the Mapocho described, analysed, and planned by Vicuña Mackenna and his successors can be understood as the *conceived* river, a space ordered by power. This arrangement had consequences on the perception that the people of Santiago had of their river, perceptions that inspired new representations of the Mapocho and marked the river's image during the 20th century. Photographs, such as those by Sergio Larraín (1957), the film *Largo Viaje* (1967) by Patricio Kaulen, or the novel *La Sangre y la Esperanza* (1943) by Nicomedes Guzmán, portrayed a river and its surroundings as places where misery, vice, and crime characterised both the landscape and its inhabitants. It is worth mentioning that most of these representations were created 'outside' the river, from the 'centre,' and often supported by hegemonic values. Therefore, to understand the lived experience of the river's inhabitants, one must "enter" the margin. That is, representations of the margin which are produced from the periphery, by individuals who inhabit spaces of physical and social marginality: the poor, the mad, the child, the prostitute, the homosexual, etc.

In this sense, the novel *El Río* by Alfredo Gómez Morel constitutes a powerful testimony to life on the margins of the Mapocho and the intricate relationship between the individual and the space they inhabit. Published in 1962, this autobiographical novel narrates the life of the *pelusas* ('fluff'), the street kids of the Mapocho, between the 1920s and 1930s, placing its characters in a space of material and existential misery. The novel focuses on the experience of a child who arrives at the Mapocho river and his determination to be part of Santiago's criminal underworld. His decision is influenced by a history of abandonment, mistreatment, and various abuses experienced both at home, by his mother, and in the boarding school, where he is sexually abused by two priests. These situations lead him to the river:

> *I reached the edge of the Mapocho. I didn't realize how. I recognised where I was by remembering my first vision of the city... I felt scared, but I knew I was free from the worst: I was out of reach of statues, brooms, and dusters"* (Gómez Morel, 1997 (1962), p. 65).

In the river, the *pelusas* call him Toño – one of the many names the protagonist receives throughout the story.[2] Despite the comings and goings between the city and the river after their first encounter, the novel explores how Toño eventually establishes himself in the Mapocho, longing to be accepted and respected by the other *pelusas*, demonstrating his belonging to them more than to the city.

In *El Río*, the Mapocho is presented as a border marking the end of the city and the beginning of another culture: the river. However, the notion of the city refers to the foundational city, Vicuña Mackenna's city, and the elite, while the Chimba is established as an allied sector where the *pelusas* sell stolen merchandise, and where brothels are located to celebrate and spend the nights. Carlos Franz captures the stark contrast between these worlds, stating, "across the river, we are forced to admit who we are... not just pure reason but also nightmare"(Franz, 2019, p. 34). His words emphasise the darker, suppressed aspects of the city's identity, which the elite sought to ignore. Gómez Morel's depiction of the

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[2] Throughout the story the protagonist receives different names: Luis, Vicente, Alfredo and Toño, which mark the different stages of his life.

Mapocho reinforces this idea, portraying the river as a dump, a place where the city's waste ends up, things that the city discards, whether garbage, waste, or people who do not align with the principles of "normality." This conception of the river as a dump dates back to the plans of Vicuña Mackenna and his successors, where the river is imagined as a sewer (Castillo, 2018), especially west of the Mapocho Station, where the garbage dumps of the Hornos Crematorios and the slums were located, and, according to Gómez Morel's account, where the *pelusas* lived (Figure 3).[3] However, the river-dump is also a home that provides refuge for children discarded by society and failed by the city and its institutions. The river then configures itself as a "third space," a socio-cultural space parallel to city life and the Chimba, where children who have been discarded by society find shelter. This idea of a border connects with the thinking of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), who argues that border zones are inhabited by the forbidden, by those who "go through the confines of the 'normal'"(p. 3). Following the perspectives of Foucault and Bhabha, where conventional boundaries blur and identities in tension find their space, the Mapocho river becomes a symbol of the complexities and contradictions of identity and culture, a heterotopic space containing different, discordant spaces where the "normal" and the "abnormal" collide and compete in the same space.
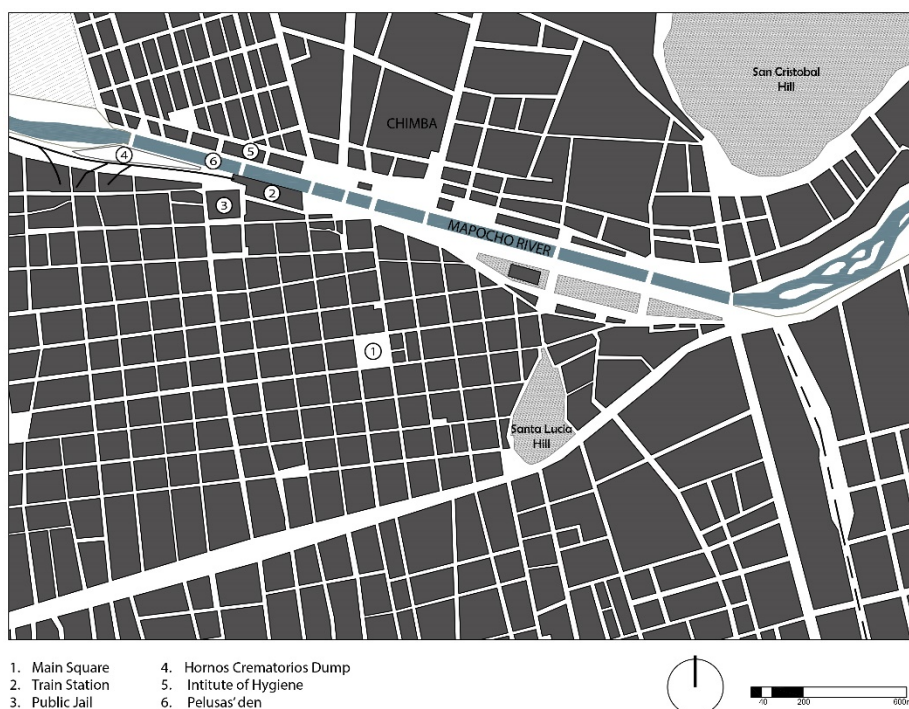

1. Main Square
2. Train Station
3. Public Jail
4. Hornos Crematorios Dump
5. Intitute of Hygiene
6. Pelusas' den

Figure 3 - Santiago in the early 20th century. (Map by the author, based on Nicanor Bolana's 1910 map.)

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[3] "Some (shacks) were located on the edge of the cutwater; others, in the middle of small forks of the river, and the least, under the bridges near the railway station." Gómez Morel, *El Río*, 115. Translation by the author.

If we consider that the parameters of normality are defined by "an elite in search of hegemony" (Tapia, 2010, p. 6), by the 'centre,' then anything outside these limits of what a society accepts is considered marginal and rejected. The novel presents a series of characters who deviate from the notion of normality and, therefore, end up in the river. These characters embody the perceived threat by those in power and symbolise the failure of the modernising utopia. A clear example of this is Panchín, Toño's fellow delinquent, who was abandoned by his mother at an early age and finds refuge in the river like many others:

> *Panchín was left alone in life when he was nine years old. His mother abandoned him to pursue a lover. She left him in a hotel room, as if tossing a bundle of dirty clothes. She never came back. The boy wandered, first through the city streets, and at dusk, he headed towards the place that collects the forsaken from all the cities in the world: the river.* (Gómez Morel, 1997 (1962), p. 130, translation by the author.)

Panchín is one of the many street children that bourgeois society observed with fear and concern, as a symptom of social degeneration. Adrian Forty's concept of hygiene as a battle against contamination reflects this fear of social margins, where the river, with its marginalised inhabitants, was perceived as a danger to the social body. Forty argues that cleanliness became an obsession as it was framed as a constant war against impurity, with the elite viewing those outside the boundaries of normality – like Panchín – as symbols of moral and physical corruption. Vicuña Mackenna (1872) saw in children a way to save the city from this degeneration: "Against the child, who can still be and must be a citizen, the school!" (p. 94). Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, children became "central figures for national projects" (Darrigrandi, 2015, p. 14) through the enactment of the Compulsory Primary Education Law in September 1920 and the Law 4.447 of Minors in 1928, where delinquent children were distinguished from adults, shifting the focus of the juvenile justice system from punishment to the correction of minors.

However, due to the difficulties experienced in their short lives, the *pelusas* in the novel cannot perceive themselves as children:

> — *"Are we children?" We looked at each other. We looked at the river and towards the bridge. We saw our hollow and empty lives, observed the sticks and knives we had in our hands, and asked ourselves: "Are we children?"* (Gómez Morel, 1997 (1962), p. 177, translation by the author.)

If we consider, as Carlos Franz points out, that children in literature are "symbols of the helplessness of the poor people and, at the same time, icons of a rootless freedom, the hope of being able to start again" (Franz, 2019, p. 101), we will understand the river children as metaphors for the failure of the modernising utopia. The denial of childhood in *El Río* then speaks, on the one hand, that the poor people are not in a state of helplessness but rise against the hegemony of the city, which is manifested in the case of the *pelusas* through their criminal activities. On the other hand, it accounts for the rupture of this modernising hope symbolised by children. By learning to inhabit the marginality of the river, they become a third thing, something that is neither a child nor an adult, embodying the border and heterotopic condition of the river.

In addition, characters like Paragüero and Mayita, although not belonging to the fluvial society, also find a place in the river due to their excluded condition. In the case of the

former, it is a literate man who comes from the city but has been expelled from it due to his addiction to morphine and his homosexuality. Despite being 'from the other side,' he is accepted by the river precisely because of his marginal condition. "We came to respect him in his condition of a fallen aristocrat, expelled by a social group, as one might respect a dethroned king" (Gómez Morel, 1997 (1962), p. 156). Similarly, Mayita was a "girl of the Mapocho nights," a prostitute who lived on the bridge. While she does not belong to the river, the *pelusas* protect and shelter her because she sells herself out of necessity, not as a profession. Both characters, like all the river inhabitants considered abnormal, dangerous, and vicious find refuge in the river. The Mapocho is then understood as a heterotopia of deviation, a counter-place where "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). These are individuals who observe the city from the margin, "based on other logics that escape the optimism that its modernisation seeks to embody in urban development projects and aesthetics implanted since the first centenary of independence" (Rojas, 2018, p. 75).

Lastly, although anyone can go down to the river (albeit at their own risk), not everyone can be a part of it. Toño experiences this the first time he goes down to the river; although he is physically there, he soon realises that he does not belong there, because the *pelusas* who received him quickly began to beat and abuse him. As Foucault suggests, not just anyone enters a heterotopia, and whoever does, does it out of obligation or by overcoming certain rituals to be accepted. In the river, it is the latter. The stages set by the river's hierarchy must be followed with discipline to access and belong to the criminal group, because "no respectable river hosts honest kids" (Gómez Morel, 1997 (1962), p. 203). Only those who prove their worth as men and as criminals can join the group because, as the fluvial principle establishes, "not just anyone enters the river" (Ibid., p.131) To belong to the river, Toño must first change his way of speaking because the river's inhabitant transgresses official structures through his speech: "Coa" (Eltit, 2014, p. 89). According to Eltit, the Chilean criminal jargon "Coa" is "learned from life itself, an oral body disciplined in torsion, which, in its practice and proliferation, names and legitimises the ultramarginal group as a social body" (Eltit, 2014, p. 89). As demonstrated, the river society is not exempt from hierarchies, which "demands, requires, and taxonomises bodies with ruthless rigour" (Ibid., p.90). These demands are inscribed in the rituals and norms of the underworld, among which two are worth mentioning: the bath and the hunt.

The bath, usually associated with the notion of cleanliness and purification, is conceived in the novel as an act of offense to the city, an act of virility where the river's children exhibit their naked bodies to the gaze of pedestrians:

> *The bath is a ritual. It has its reasons and follows a ceremony. The pelusas, by undressing, show their scars and tattoos: titles of "honourability" and criminal toughness. The heat sometimes influences, but more importantly, the desire to offend the city is crucial. They usually whistle at those who hurry across the bridge so that when they look, they see them exhibiting their genitals. Furthermore, a pelusa, by undressing, is showing the others that despite his youth and beautiful forms, he is a tough guy. He doesn't care if they watch him. He knows he is invulnerable, given his status as a son of the river, not the channel.* (Gómez Morel, 1997 (1962), p. 240. Translation by the author)

The body as the only asset of a *pelusa*, is exacerbated in the novel. It is through the body that the heterotopia makes sense. The act of bathing then takes on new meanings; it is not just an offence to pedestrians but an act of defiance towards the laws of the city.

Another mentioned ritual is the hunting of canal children. This consists of the pursuit and rape by the river's children of the youngsters discarded by the hierarchies. Homosexual practice in the novel is portrayed as an act of domination and power. Although sexuality is exercised between men, in *El Río*, a homosexual is the one who is dominated and, therefore, perceived as inferior. The river thus replicates the city's marginalisation practices, where the displaced from the fluvial world go to the canal. This is the case of Toño, who loses his place and future in the river after being abused by another criminal. His own companions expel him, sending him to the channel, the "marginalised sector of the margin space" (Carvancho, 2016, p. 91).

Mapocho's imaginaries: the real-and-imagined Mapocho

This article examined the Mapocho River as a fluid border that has evolved over time, transforming from a mere watercourse into a complex heterotopic space. The study of fluvial imaginaries explored how the Mapocho has been constructed physically and imaginatively. Specifically, the article centred on the last decades of the 19th century and the early 20th century, a period marked by urban growth, industrialisation, and modernisation processes in the Chilean capital. The Mapocho is presented to us through its imaginaries as a space that is not real nor imagined but real-and-imagined. Here, the lived experience in physical space intertwines with the perceptions and representations that society has developed. Recognising that perceptions of rivers are shaped by the needs, values, and identities of those who inhabit them, the article focused on studying the river imaginaries of the Mapocho as a method for understanding the real and imagined impact of various processes on the urban river landscape. From the official perspective, as presented in Vicuña Mackenna's *La Transformación de Santiago*, the Mapocho is conceived as a space to be controlled and ordered, characterising it as a place of misery, vice, and crime. In this way, the river was conceptualised as a border, marking the division between the "civilised" and the "barbaric," between the foundational city and the Chimba. These conceptions profoundly affected the materiality of the river and its surroundings, confining it to a situation of urban and social marginality. The novel *El Río* by Alfredo Gómez Morel, on the other hand, illustrates the consequences of Vicuña Mackenna's discourses and those of his successors providing a counter view from the perspective of those who inhabit the river's margins. Through its characters, the novel explores the marginality and search for identity of the river's inhabitants in the early 20th century. Gómez Morel's Mapocho becomes a refuge and a space of belonging for those excluded by society, simultaneously questioning established norms and values. Both in *La Transformación de Santiago* and in *El Río*, it is observed how the imaginaries of the Mapocho reflect Santiago's society, its power discourses, and marginal subversion, where the space of the river, its representations, and its social uses influence each other.

The concepts of heterotopia proposed by Foucault and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of border prove useful for analysing the Mapocho's imaginaries. These conceptual frameworks allow an understanding of how the river has evolved from a physical boundary to a cultural border and how it has emerged as a space where identities in tension find their place. The Mapocho becomes a space that juxtaposes incompatible uses; it is both a home and a shelter as well as where the city's waste is eliminated, embodying the spatial heterogeneity described by

Foucault. The temporal and spatial distinctiveness of the river and its inhabitants serves as a testament to their 'otherness,' removed from conventional social norms and time frames. The river is where those rejected by society end up. However, not just anyone enters the river, and therefore, Toño, the protagonist, must prove his worth through initiation rituals in the criminal underworld.

The construction of the Mapocho River as a border, both in its physical aspect and its imaginary dimension, leads to a deeper reflection on how power operates in the lived experience of the river. This is replicated in *El Río* when describing the hunting of the canal children. The Mapocho, as portrayed in *El Río*, embodies the clash between social order and marginality but also the clash of power between the different characters that inhabit the river. It represents a transformed border, not only between physical territories but between norms and deviations, inclusion and exclusion. The heterotopic nature of the river shapes the lives of those who inhabit its margins, offering a complex reflection on the aspirations and deficiencies of their society. In this context, *El Río* becomes a narrative space that intertwines personal and social experiences into a rich and complex tapestry. As characters find refuge along the river's edge, they explore the liminal space between norm and anomaly, stability and chaos, social expectations, and personal quests. This novel, as a reflection of marginalised voices, underscores the role of the river as a heterotopia in the broader discourse of city transformation and the nuanced narratives that emerge from its margins.

The Mapocho river, therefore, is not just a geographical element but a space loaded with meanings, symbols, and narratives shaped by the social, economic, and cultural needs of the city and its inhabitants over time. Its transformation reflects the complex interaction between urbanisation, modernisation, and the construction of urban identities. As contemporary Santiago grapples with issues of inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural identity, the Mapocho stands as a reminder of the ongoing struggle between the forces of progress and the realities of marginalisation. This river's evolution—from a mere dividing border to a rich borderland—challenges conventional views of rivers as simple natural boundaries, prompting further exploration of how urban spaces can reflect and influence societal values.

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