


Sección Especial Inmovilidades

Permanent Impermanence in the Anthropocene. The emergence of a guest-worker society in a Patagonian Mountain village

TOMÁS SALEM¹

 0000-0001-6270-8811

Universitetet i Bergen, Norge

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España



Abstract

At a stage of capitalism where “the environment” emerges as an existential category, conservation policies become weaved into processes of expulsion. The idea that there is not enough for everyone reconfigures social relations according to the logics of guest-worker societies, where rights and belonging are contingent on employment. Through the exploration of mobile homes as a practice of im/mobilization and resistance to the dynamics of expulsion in El Chaltén (Argentina), I develop the concept of permanent impermanence as a way of theorizing the affective experience of Anthropocene im/mobilization, and its patterning across spatial and temporal dimensions.

Keywords: Mobility; Expulsion; Tourism; Conservation; Urbanisation.

Resumen: *Impermanencia permanente en el Antropoceno. La emergencia de una sociedad de trabajadores invitados en un pueblo de montaña patagónico*

En una etapa del capitalismo en la que “el medio ambiente” surge como categoría existencial, las políticas de conservación se entrelazan en procesos de expulsión. La idea de que no hay suficiente para todos reconfigura las relaciones sociales según las

¹ Tomás Salem – tomas.salem@uib.no



lógicas de las sociedades de trabajadores invitados, donde los derechos y la pertenencia son contingentes al empleo. A través de la exploración de las casas móviles como una práctica de in/movilización y resistencia a las dinámicas de expulsión en El Chaltén (Argentina), desarrollo el concepto de permanencia permanente como forma de teorizar la experiencia afectiva de la in/movilización del Antropoceno y su modelado a lo largo de dimensiones espaciales y temporales.

Palabras clave: Movilidad; Expulsión; Turismo; Conservación; Urbanización.



Image 1: Los Glaciares National Park. Salem, 2020.

Introduction

In 2020, with the Argentine village of El Chaltén (image 1) in lockdown, the property where Rodrigo and his family of four had lived for ten years was sold to a business owner from Rosario for 170.000 USD, forcing Rodrigo's family to move to make space for new tourist rentals. Pressed for options, Rodrigo decided to build a small *casa sobre trineo* (lit. house on sledge) that could be moved if needed (image 2). Since his wife worked as a schoolteacher, the municipality helped them find a place to park their home while they waited for a permanent solution. Tired of fighting to remain as the village becomes gentrified, Rodrigo decided he would load his home onto a truck and transport it 200 km to El Calafate if they were forced to move again. Like many

landless neighbors, Rodrigo's family live in a state of *permanent impermanence*: their life projects truncated by the overlapping dynamics of lifestyle migration, tourism, and the conservation policies that have emerged in the Anthropocene². At this intersection, the romantic pursuit of the good life in the mountains is reconfigured and commodified, sustaining a predatory rentier capitalism, while discourses about the end of nature reaffirm the ecosystem as that which must be protected at the cost of a socially inclusive urban future.



Image 2: A home "parked" on the sidewalk. Salem, 2023.

Close to Rodrigo's old home, Sonia, an out-of-town investor, recently built a six-bedroom hotel and an adjacent restaurant. Her business is going far better than she expected. In the summer season of 2023, she charged up to 250 USD a night per room. However, Sonia is frustrated with the villagers, who she complains "do not want to work." She has already quarreled with two construction workers, withholding 80 USD for a job that was not carried out to her satisfaction. A few months ago, her staff resigned in protest, moving out of the caravan she had provided for accommodation. While Sonia lives here during the summer months, she plans to

² In *The Conservation Revolution* Bran Büscher and Robert Fletcher (2020) discuss conservation in the Anthropocene, focusing mainly on the challenges and dilemmas of what they call *new conservation* and the *neo-protectionist positions*. In this text I do not relate to specific conservation-policies but explore the tensions between conservation and development that arise from the understanding of Patagonia as one of the world's last remaining wilderness areas.

reside elsewhere when her business is up and running, prioritizing her business over preserving good neighborly relations.

Like many other landowners, most of whom bought their properties through generous state grants, she worries about the growth of El Chaltén. The town is located within the confines of Los Glaciares National Park (Parque Nacional Los Glaciares, PNLG). Sonia says that it would be crazy to expand the village into one of the world's last wilderness areas. She says that people in the state administration have told her that there will not be any more grants: "The people who are waiting for land here should prepare to get disappointed."³ Even the slightest expansion would be like breaching a dam: "It would be the end of El Chaltén as we know it. This would become like Bariloche," she says, referencing Patagonia's biggest tourist city, where population growth has not been accompanied by investments in infrastructure while precarity and socioeconomic inequality is causing a plethora of social problems. But while she rejects a town expansion, she does plan to expand her restaurant: it does not need to be big—with a high turnover she could increase her seasonal profit by 100.000 USD or more.

Migration patterns emerging from seasonal tourism and the pursuit of happiness in the mountains have elsewhere been approached as amenities or lifestyle migration (see Bianchi, 2000; Boscoboinik and Cretton, 2017; Soronellas-Masdeu and Offenhenden 2022). This text engages debates on Anthropocene mobilities and critical urban studies to analyze patterns of im/mobilization in El Chaltén. Following a Deleuzian reading of desire as that which drives action; which makes the world cohere, I ask *what* world coheres around particular happiness fantasies and how the promise of future happiness (or lack thereof) shapes social practices and how ideas about the good life materialize in El Chaltén's urban infrastructure (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). How are im/mobilization patterns shaping inequality and social stratification, and what social forms emerge as capitalist dynamics (predatory and corporate) coalesce with an increasing emphasis on conservation?

I suggest that the notion of permanent impermanence offers a way to theorize the social dynamics, im/mobilizations, and affective experience of Anthropocene

³ While working on this article in 2023, local authorities zoned out a new area for urbanization through a new allocation of land-grants: the first since 2014.

urbanism, produced through historically specific, often conflicting, social, political, economic, and environmental processes. The concept highlights how environmental discourses are increasingly weaved into logics of expulsion (Sassen, 2014), resulting in the emergence of guest-worker societies in El Chaltén and elsewhere: socioeconomic formations that rely on a migrant workforce, where social belonging is contingent on people's usefulness to the economy, marking the end of modernist ideals of citizenship. This text can thus be read as a contribution to the new mobilities paradigm through the category of Anthropocene im/mobilizations, showing how "green capitalism" and environmental priorities are reshaping urban dynamics of belonging.

The analysis is based on my long-term engagement with El Chaltén, where I have travelled to and lived since 2007 in my capacity as mountain guide until 2013 and as ethnographer since 2019, totaling 7 months of research, writing fieldnotes, and tape-recording over 60 interviews and conversations. In the last 16 years, I have seen the village develop as an international tourist destination. I have also been enmeshed in attempts to acquire land and, at one point, planned to build a sledge home, gaining first-hand experience of the frictions and challenges this implies. While I have spoken with a broad range of people, the subjects of this text are mainly tourist-sector workers, middle-class residents, and people I am proud to call my friends and neighbors⁴.

Anthropocene im/mobilizations and the pursuit of the good life

Like Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) processual philosophy, the new mobilities paradigm presumes a dynamic social field in constant movement and transformation. Challenging sedentarist theories derived from Heidegger's notion of dwelling as the way in which humans should inhabit Earth, it "emphasizes that all places are tied into [...] networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place and mean that nowhere can be an 'island'" (Sheller and Urry, 2006, p.209). Similarly, recent reconceptualizations of "the urban" challenge the urban-rural divide, urging us to focus instead on processes along a planetary "urban continuum" (Brenner, 2013).

⁴ This text is part of a project that compares El Chaltén with the Norwegian mountain village of Longyearbyen to trace emergent global dynamics of the 21st century in areas that are considered frontiers between civilization and the wilderness.

Such processual perspectives call for a “nomadic metaphysics” to analyze a world that is constantly on the move (Cresswell, 2006). A problem with the new mobilities approach, however, is the fuzziness of its core concept, or as Peter Adey (2006, p.75-76) states: “If mobility is everything then it is nothing.” One way to address this challenge is to approach mobility as relational rather than an ontological absolute, understanding im/mobility as mutually constituted, entangled, and contingent on the dimension through which we approach the social field—i.e. how im/mobility gains meaning according to context and perspective (Franquesa, 2011). This allows us to focus on how im/mobilizations are structured by different power regimes.

In the argument about im/mobility I want to make, two contributions are of particular interest. The first challenges dichotomous readings that give mobility positive valence and immobility negative valence. First, let’s consider Les Todres and Kathleen Galvin’s phenomenological approach towards an existential theory of well-being, structured around the notion of dwelling-mobility:

The deepest possibility of existential well-being lies in the unity of dwelling-mobility. Guided by Heidegger’s notion of *Gegnet*, dwelling-mobility describes both the “adventure” of being called into existential possibilities as well as the “being at home with” what has been given. This deepest possibility carries with it a feeling of rootedness and flow, peace and possibility (Todres and Galvin, 2010, p.5).

They emphasize how experiences of dwelling and mobility are contingent on Husserl’s “lifeworld constituents”: spatiality, temporality, intersubjectivity, mood and embodiment. Both mobility and dwelling take on different meanings when experienced through these categories. Dwelling thus refers to a sense of being at home, being grounded, kinship and belonging, peace, being at one with the world, or of comfort, while mobility denotes a sense of adventure, moving forward, interpersonal attraction, excitement or desire, possibility, or of vitality (Todres and Galvin, 2010, p.5-6).

The second contribution is Andrew Baldwin, Christians Frölich, and Self Rothe’s notion of Anthropocene mobilities. Baldwin et al. (2019) are critical of the lack of theorization of “nature” and “the environment” as the material substance through which mobility is mediated, experienced, and conceptualized. They argue that the Anthropocene

challenges us to think about mobility in a way “that remains faithful to the brute fact that mobility in our hyper-capitalist and hyper-extractivist world is invariably bound up with the fortunes and fate of the Earth system” (Baldwin et al., 2019, p.293).

Here, in addition to approaching “nature and the environment” as a materiality that mediates mobility, I am interested in understanding how these categories have come to act as “objects that magnetize desire” (Ahmed, 2010), forming part of a moral economy that pulls, guides, and produces certain paths of action. Thus, nature is both a material surface upon which movement occurs and a (contested) value that informs patterns of mobility through its proximity to ideas about happiness and the good life. Furthermore, Baldwin et al. (2019) suggest that “mobility justice” might be better suited to analyze migration patterns of the Anthropocene, as it shifts attention towards the social (rather than natural) processes that mediate environmental concerns. In El Chaltén, the Anthropocene discourse (rather than ontology) informs politics and attitudes towards the preservation of “one of the world’s last remaining wilderness areas,” producing a situation where the primacy of environmental concerns patterns im/mobilizations in the form of social exclusion and expulsion. Reading these contributions in tandem, we can approach the ethnographic context of El Chaltén’s mobile homes with a conceptual toolkit to analyze the affective experience of Anthropocene im/mobilizations in relation to categories such as spatiality and temporality, while paying attention to the ideational and material conditions that shape im/mobilizations.

The fantasy of landownership

El Chaltén is a small mountain village in southern Patagonia. Established in 1985 to assert Argentine sovereignty in the area, it was conceived as a tourist hamlet in the northern sector of PNLG, Argentina’s biggest National Park. To populate the town, state authorities handed out land grants to people who settled there. Today, the spectacular mountain scenery of the region as well as infrastructural developments has transformed El Chaltén into one of the country’s main destinations. The town’s land-grant recipients compose an emergent landowning class. Those who have built hotels and restaurants on their land have seen their income skyrocket due to the high profitability of international tourism. However, while the tourist industry continues to grow, town expansions are halted by the protection of surrounding areas (image 3). Like other booming destinations, there are strong economic incentives to

prioritize tourism accommodation and infrastructure, as short-term rentals in most cases surpasses long-term rent by a ratio of 1:30 or more⁵. Meanwhile, wage laborers struggle to settle down due to the high cost of land and the interruption of land grants from 2014 onwards.



Image 3: El Chaltén and its border to the National Park. Salem, 2020.

Seasonal workers in the tourist sector are called *golondrinas* (swallows) due to their migration patterns. Some spend the winter months in Bariloche, home to Argentina's biggest ski resort, others travel to Europe for work or holidays, yet others visit family and friends in their hometowns. Class hierarchies within this group are often gendered, with predominantly male mountain guides earning high salaries and migrating with ease, while other seasonal workers remain in El Chaltén during the winter months without any income. Many *golondrinas* have settled permanently in the village and applied for future land grants promised by the state. Some have been waiting a decade or more, while others have tired and left. Those who stay craft a life and create an identity as *chaltenenses* but are rarely able to assert their belonging the same way as landowners, since this is associated with land ownership.

⁵ These are conservative estimates based on monthly rates (for a home) of approx. 100 USD (30.000 ARS) and daily rates (for a room) in the range of 100-150 USD.

Knowing that the number of applications far exceeds available land, some villagers assume that the allotment of what little land is left will provoke social unrest as hopes for a future solution among those who are left out dwindle. Calls for an expansion of the village into surrounding areas is generally met with resistance among landowners. Like Sonia, most *chaltenses* want to retain the image of El Chaltén as a small, quaint, and pristine wilderness destination. While many fear that a village expansion will lead to uncontrolled urbanization, business owners continue to rely on “imported” labor, especially people from Argentina’s poorer provinces that are willing to accept lower wages. In some cases, these are women escaping situations of domestic violence in their hometowns, making them especially vulnerable to abusive labor conditions.

Landless residents live in crowded hostels, tents, or caravans. Some rent residences in conditions that make them unviable for tourism (I was once offered a space beneath a staircase that would barely fit a mattress) or rely on personal networks to access a shrinking long-term rental market. Landlords are aware of the difficulties faced by tenants. While some express sympathy with the landless class, especially with those who have lived in the village for years, many impose draconian or illegal rental agreements. A single mother living in a caravan with her 4-year-old daughter described these experiences as “living with the landlord’s boot pressed against your neck.”

The first wave of settlers, who arrived in the late 80’s and early 90’s, were in some cases allotted large pieces of land that were originally conceived for animal husbandry but have been developed for tourism. A handful of these have continued to accumulate properties in town, earning small (or large) fortunes. Among the villagers are some of Argentina’s wealthiest citizens. However, most landowners are small business owners, with incomes that allow them to live a comfortable middle-class lifestyle which often includes extended holidays abroad during the off-season and high-paced work during the summer. Latecomers to this first wave generally received smaller lots. While these are zoned for housing, most landowners reserve a piece of their land for business: restaurants, accommodation, or shops.

The landless class is also diverse. Mostly composed of people who arrived in El Chaltén from the second half of the 2000’s and onwards, many are long-term residents that live there year-round. Others are seasonal workers in tourism and

construction who come in pursuit of economic opportunities and/or the dream of the Patagonian adventure: a simple life surrounded by nature. Their opportunities to remain are conditioned by their social network, economic resources, and employment. While some employers offer accommodation, these are generally precarious and temporary shared residences in (windowless) dorms and rarely viable long-term solutions (image 4). More than homes, they are places to rest between work.



Image 4: Not so temporary housing. Salem, 2021.

The seasonal character of tourism with its associated migration patterns shapes sociopolitical dynamics in the village. Summers are marked by work, leaving little time for socializing. Inversely, during the winter months, “free time” is abundant. However, as most seasonal workers leave during this period, potential social and political processes are interrupted (Picone, 2021). Migration patterns and lack of adequate, year-round housing thus stifles the continuity of political mobilizations that might challenge the status quo.

Some analytical observations are in place. Part of a global trend, real estate prices in El Chaltén have increased at a galloping pace in the last decade. What might have been accessible to well-paid professionals five or ten years ago, have become prohibiting as land value is determined by financial profit or tourist rent. Today, buying land for housing is simply not feasible to people with an average income.

Those waiting for land-grants have seen possibilities of accessing land on the private market dissipate. Many have chosen to live in different kinds of mobile homes, turning to the state for a solution. This “forced mobility” is closely tied to the affective experience of being “stuck” in relation to culturally established ideas of life-progress. This presents us with a theoretical dilemma that challenges the cohesion of the mobilities framework. We observe a situation that can be seen as highly mobile *or* immobile, depending on the perspective that we adopt, highlighting the ambiguity of the concept of mobility.

Second, and mirroring the depoliticizing dynamics of the Anthropocene debate and its dismissal of social justice in favor of environmental concerns (Johnson and Morehouse, 2014), we see a large part of the population denied access to resources and the possibility to permanently settle down in their community due to environmental concerns. Noting how the lack of housing affects the pool of seasonal workers, some land- and business-owners suggest that the solution is to require *all* businesses to provide accommodation for their employees. One of the bigger landowners in town explained it the following way: “If someone wants to open a hotel with a staff of twelve, there should be a rule that required them to spare three rooms for their employees.” The same landowner argued that it might be necessary to set a population limit in the village. When I asked if they had considered building housing on their large and largely undeveloped property, they objected: They had moved here from the city in search for tranquility and space. Similar arguments were used by other landowners as well who did not want to resign their gardens but defended their “right” to establish new businesses on the land that they had been allotted by the state. As tensions arising from growing inequalities are increasingly felt, some of them have pondered leaving the village. The rent that their land produces allow them to live comfortably elsewhere. What kind of village emerges as a result? How can the notion of permanent impermanence help us identify patterns of Anthropocene im/mobilizations that might be applicable to contexts beyond El Chaltén? I will return to these questions soon.



Image 5: A mobile home on wheels. Salem, 2021.

Challenging expulsion through mobile homes

But first I want to explore one of the subsistence strategies employed by the town's landless neighbors in response to tourist gentrification: the reliance on mobile homes. In El Chaltén, the paradigmatic mobile home—the tent—has been a hallmark feature of village life. From the first climbers who explored the area prior to its establishment, to the seasonal workers who, up until the summer season of 2008-2009 could pitch a tent at PNLG's Madsen-campsite for free. Madsen had the distinct feel of a countercultural, free-spirited community, where climbers, hippies, and seasonal workers would share in communal life during the summer. During my first summer as a *golondrina*, park authorities had just closed it following pressure from local business owners who did not appreciate the laid-back aesthetic of the campsite: Dotted with flimsy tents sporting impromptu extensions of plastic and tarps it resembled a shantytown (Mendoza, 2018, p.92). Those who had lived there for free now had to find accommodation elsewhere. Some pitched their tent in private campgrounds or found other mobile solutions, such as vans and caravans. For those who wanted to build a future in El Chaltén, these were usually seen as *ad-hoc*, temporary solutions. In the decade that followed, most of them were still convinced that they would eventually receive a state grant. To avoid having to search for a new

place to live each season, some found a more long-term solution: Small houses built on a steel frame—a sledge—that allowed them to be dragged by truck from one location to the next (image 5).

These homes are material and social strategies of immobilization: Attempts to affirm a particular place-bound way of being in the world structured around a romantic fantasy of the good life in nature. Sledge homes are also materializations of an ambiguous temporal horizon. On the one hand, they symbolize the long-term aspiration of home-owner(s) intent on building a life the village. On the other, they express yet another individualizing short-term solution to the (chronic) housing emergency of El Chaltén. Thus, they are expressions of the permanent impermanence of El Chaltén's landless classes; materializations of the *cruel optimism* (Berlant, 2011) that the state's promise of future landownership produces. The ambiguity between the long- and short-term produces a particular kind of materiality of the home. To circulate through the village roads these homes cannot be more than 3 meters wide or taller than 4,5 meters in order to pass beneath the electric grid. These dimensions allow for the construction of a low second floor where the bedroom is usually located. The possibility of moving the home in the future also impacts material choices, with mobile homes built in wood or metal—as opposed to brick and mortar which symbolizes permanence and durability.

The construction of sledge homes is an emergent and unregulated social practice. Homes are either self-built or built by autodidact villagers who have turned to construction as a side-gig. Initially, many homes were located on the land of friends and neighbors willing to resign space for a symbolic rent, often the payment of municipal taxes. Landowners who had not yet built on their land also benefited from mobile homes, as these fulfilled the formal requirement to put the land to use within a given time following allotment. Thus, some landowners have prioritized tourist rentals while others choose to rent the available space on their land to their neighbors. The latter were often motivated by solidarity with friends and neighbors whom they identified and empathized with. Consequently, the initial proliferation of sledge homes was marked by the emergence of a social sphere shaped by relations of reciprocity. Mobile homeowners would also repay landowners with small gifts and favors that varied according to their needs and the initiative of the tenant, i.g. English lessons, construction material, maintenance, and property "improvements" (erecting

a picket-fence or sowing a lawn). However, the market economy quickly penetrated these relations, increasingly formalizing them through contracts and setting rent according to market prices.

A recipient of the 2014-allotment had accommodated three caravans, a sledge home, and their sister's permanent home on their land, in addition to their own home. They explained that their tenants insisted they sign a contract stipulating rent, which implies a transactional relation rather than one of reciprocity. When I asked them how much she charged their tenants, they had to check their papers. Their sister did not pay rent, but the caravan owners paid 9000 pesos each month (approximately 30 USD in January 2023) and the mobile-home owners a little more⁶. They had set the price after consulting "market" prices with other neighbors and told me that their tenants remind them when it's time to raise the rent, as inflation in Argentina is high (averaging at around 95% in 2022).

The tenants desire for contractual relations indicates that reciprocal relations sustain power inequalities when private property remains an underlying condition shaping asymmetries. According to tenants, they always felt indebted to their landlord, regardless of the number of "favors" they provided. They were aware that their permanence in town depended on the goodwill of their landlords. Contractual relations and setting a market price were believed to prevent conflicts and ease feelings of indebtedness among tenants who nevertheless continued doing favors for their landlords to keep good neighborly relations: "We suggested signing a contract and paying rent. For me it would be easier since I always feel indebted," a female mountain guide and mobile home-owner who has lived in El Chaltén since 2006 explained. She and her partner helped their landlord economically with cash transfers in addition to rent and also through small gifts and favors. While the market value of these gifts and favors amount to more than a normal rent, their exact monetary value is difficult or impossible to calculate and since what they receive in return—the possibility to keep living in El Chaltén—is so important to them, they still feel

⁶ During the 2022-2023 summer season, monthly salaries in the seasonal private sector (reception clerks and waiters) of El Chaltén ranged between 100.000 and 200.000 ARS (350-700 USD). A salary of year-round employees (public sector) figured around 140.000 ARS (450 USD) a month. Freelance mountain guides earned significantly higher salaries as their daily rate was paid in dollars and ranged between 140-350 USD.

indebted: “[As a tenant] your goal is to be invisible, to bother the landlord as little as possible,” she said.



Image 6: Chaltén’s new squat. Salem, 2023.

In April 2022, a group of landless neighbors organized the first collective squat of El Chaltén⁷. They occupied the town’s soccer field, transporting their mobile homes (mainly caravans) to the field, and started building fences around the land that they had claimed (image 6). A squatter justified these actions as a reaction to what they perceived as the state’s “indifference and neglect.” “The times of the state and my times are different,” they explained. They felt that life would pass them by before the authorities would find a solution. Coming from a humble background, they had seen older friends wait 15 years for a land-grant, making them determined to act while they were still young and “had the energy” required to sustain a squat. Pointing at the temporal divergence between what they describe as “the times of the state” and that of their neighbors, this comment points to the power relations embedded in the spatio-temporal patterning of im/mobilizations in El Chaltén as the Argentine state negotiates temporal horizons shaped by political cycles and global capitalism and that of the town’s housing emergency. Meanwhile, landless neighbors feel stuck in their life-projects. Unable to access a plot of land where they can settle down and facing

⁷ Earlier squats in El Chaltén had been mostly individual endeavors.

mounting pressures in the rental market, they must live with the constant possibility of being uprooted and forced to leave. Some of them keep caravans in case they have to move out of their home on short notice. Interestingly, this logic does not only affect the lifestyle- and labor-migrants settling in town but also new generations of native *Chaltenenses*—born in the village but struggling to gain independence from their landowning (or not) parents.

The group of squatters divided the football field in 10 equal lots, leaving room for a street that would run through the *asentamiento* (lit. settlement; township). Many *Chaltenenses* expressed support for the squatters, whom they identified with, while others were ambivalent or disapproving. Some of those waiting for future grant allotments saw squatting as “jumping the line” and reducing the amount of available land. The legitimacy of the squat revolved around questions of deservedness, with years spent in El Chaltén, contributions to the local community, and perceived socioeconomic needs (poverty) as central categories. Categories of *merit* and *need* were often invoked in critiques of squatters, signaling those whom had only lived in El Chaltén for a few years (thus lacking merit) or who’s economic situation was not considered pressing enough (not in need). Thus, one squatter was deemed undeserving since they owned an older Toyota Hilux (a status symbol in Patagonia), while another allegedly had an apartment in the affluent Buenos Aires neighborhood of Palermo.

Such discussions about deservedness a) divert the attention from the kind of urban and social configuration that is emerging in El Chaltén; b) fragment the landless workers of the town; and c) leave assumptions that “there is not enough for everyone” unchallenged. However, what sets El Chaltén apart from other iterations of social inequality is the “impossibility” of expanding the town due to environmental concerns, and especially the idea of Patagonia as one of the world’s last remaining wilderness areas—although there is a continuity with settler colonial imaginaries of Patagonia as a “desert”; an imaginary that undergrid the expulsion of indigenous populations as well as cattle ranchers from the region in the 19th and 20th century (Lublin, 2021). Thus, while landowners assert their right to keep building tourism infrastructure such as restaurants and hotels, the workforce needed to sustain these is being expelled due to “environmental concerns” and particularly, the preservation of an aestheticized wilderness landscape.

The aforementioned “solution” (requiring employers to provide accommodation) suggested by some landowners as well as representatives from the local chamber of commerce (*Cámara del Comercio*) strengthens the dependency of employees on their employers. The social form that emerges from these dynamics share many similarities with guest-worker states that rely on temporary migrant labor but where citizenship rights are withheld, and permanence is conditioned on employment—a nascent form of 21st century feudalism. Crucially, what we are seeing is guest-worker dynamics emerging within national contexts rather than transnational ones.



Image 7: Future apartments. Salem, 2023.

In response to pressure from landless neighbors, state authorities started building El Chaltén’s first public housing project in 2022, meant to substitute grants. The first project contained 22 apartments, with 90 more planned (image 7). To many people waiting for land, this felt like a betrayal. They dreamt of a home with a garden where they could grow vegetables or start their own business, arguing that since the apartments did not accommodate for these uses it would calcify existing inequalities since beneficiaries would not be able to access land-grants in the future or pursue strategies towards their economic independence (e.g. partake in the rentier economy). In other words, they did not accommodate for customary forms of dwelling, as landownership is one of the main avenues for individual freedom and social mobility in a national economy where employment is generally poorly paid, precarious, and unstable. While the apartments would solve an immediate need for

housing and were arguably welcomed by some of El Chaltén's poorest families, other neighbors believed they would perpetuate classed relations of dependence. To *Chaltenenses*, landownership was about more than finding a place to live; it was a way of being in the world associated with economic independence and freedom.

Romantic pursuits and permanent impermanence in the Anthropocene

The people I spoke to in El Chaltén generally did not pursue shared or communal forms of ownership. Their ideas of the good life remained anchored in access to private property as a path to individual autonomy and freedom, urging critical scholars on the left to also consider the emancipatory potential of this form (see Piketty, 2014). As the notion of Anthropocene mobilities suggests, the im/mobilizations I have described are political and socially stratifying. My central concern has been to approach the relation between conservation and migration as one that must be explained—not a problem to be solved—as the Anthropocene emerges as a discourse and distinctive power regime patterning im/mobilizations in space and time. In El Chaltén, Anthropocene im/mobilizations are shaped by romantic pursuits of the good life, environmental notions of scarcity, and the *long durée* rentier economy that characterizes Argentina—currently reconfigured by transnational eco-tourism (Mendoza, 2018). The case of the mobile homes urges us to pay attention to the spatio-temporal patterning of labor shaped by tourism and state to understand these dynamics.

In this regard, seasonality is important in shaping im/mobilizations (e.g. migration between summer and winter destinations), but bureaucratic (e.g. processing time of grant applications; coordination between institutions; assessment of environmental impacts) and political processes (e.g. allocation of responsibilities; negotiation of proposals; environmental concerns), as well as electoral (e.g. uses of the 'housing emergency' to leverage electoral gains) and economic cycles (e.g. the ebb and flow of international tourism; national economic policies; regional state budgets) also define the paths, pace, and rhythms of im/mobilizations. Additionally, the Anthropocene adds geological time to the mix, making the collapse of temporalities a defining feature of the emergent power-regime. These spatio-temporal patterns are powerful structuring forces, shaping individual life-projects as lifestyle- and labor-migrants wait for the opportunity to permanently settle down (see Jacobsen et al., 2021).

The conjunction of seasonality, gentrification, and conservation in El Chaltén fuels the expulsion of a new class of guest-workers: Subjects whose belonging is temporally circumscribed by employment and who are not seen as real *Chaltenenses*. Importantly, while El Chaltén's guest-workers differ from transnational guest-workers in their formal access to political rights, seasonal migration patterns interrupt processes of political organization and mobilization, conditioning opportunities to gain political influence and representation (e.g. when seasonal workers leave and are replaced by newcomers) (Picone, 2021). In these processes, we observe environmental concerns increasingly contributing to a reconfiguration of the social according to the logics of the guest-worker society, as well as the insidious dynamics of rentier capitalism penetrating the intimacies of friendship and neighborly relations as class relations solidify (see Kalb, 2024).

Furthermore, the claims that there is not enough space for everyone, that there should be a population limit, or that "latecomers" should find somewhere else to live, shift the focus from issues of land distribution and use to that of overpopulation. Such Malthusian arguments are sustained through an idea of scarcity (Kallis, 2019) that taken to the extreme (when they engage biological theories of resource depletion and species collapse), can lead to suggestions to "reduce" the population. What if the challenge is instead framed as one of land distribution and -use? Some neighbors understand "the problem" this way: As a small group of people owning a lot of land, used for speculation or business in areas zoned for residential use.



Image 8: New businesses around a mobile home. Salem, 2023.

While *Chaltenenses* weigh the loss of their ‘pristine’ mountain village against their desire for further growth, municipal authorities have resigned enforcing zoning regulations and building codes, contributing to a sense of institutional anarchy. This should not be understood as a failure of local governmental structures but as the socio-political context needed for capitalist predation to thrive. The current regime benefits real-estate investors and landowners who seek to maximize their profits, either through tax evasion, illegal real-estate developments, or the intentional breach of environmental regulations and building codes to accommodate business.

The current zeitgeist seems to be of an impasse where climate change and environmental destruction emerge as all-encompassing crises while the modern fantasy of progress and prosperity recedes (see Chandler, 2019; Barker, 2022). In this context, “the politics of modernity [...] appear woefully inadequate to the task of confronting unfamiliar conditions in the Anthropocene” (Johnson and Morehouse, 2014). Increasingly, many sense that we cannot solve the current challenges through continued economic growth—especially through extractive capitalist expansion. This impasse manifests in tensions between conservation politics and social inclusion. In El Chaltén, as elsewhere, political solutions struggle to pursue both ends at the same time, despite attempts at “greening” capitalism: either the environment must be protected, turning social justice and inclusion into a secondary concern, or the economy is stimulated to accommodate for a growing population through expanding

urbanization and the extractive business of tourism (see Sokolíčková 2023) (Image 8). In Patagonia, the synthesis that emerges from these opposing logics is perverse: while growth is pursued through tourism, social inequalities intensify through processes of expulsion. We face a situation of continued environmental deterioration from business expansion but of halted social inclusion due to environmental concerns (see Picone, 2020; Picone et al., 2022). The worst of two worlds, one might conclude. The extractive capitalist dynamics that produce environmental destruction and social inequality remain unchallenged—these are, we are told, the only viable way to organize a globalized and interdependent system of production and exchange.

While demands originating from El Chaltén's neighbors are articulated around access to private landownership, I also want to reflect on forms of shared or public ownership that might accommodate for experiments with other ways of dwelling. The mobile homes or the now closed Madsen campsite is one example of the forms of life that might flourish in spaces organized according to other logics. Such spaces can be sites for creativity and experimentation; communal spaces that exist outside of the pervasive and homogenizing spheres of market and state. In the face of the ecological and social catastrophes that we are witnessing, allowing such spaces and their associated practices to emerge, making room for the creative and spontaneous flourishing of life, might offer answers to contemporary challenges. Alternately, we can keep insisting that the solution to the crisis of capitalism is more capitalism—seemingly the refrain of our time.

When I meet Sonia again, she has thought about her contribution to El Chaltén. She says that she was recently presented with a shady business opportunity that would have made her a lot of money: "But I felt that it would not be right." Finding it difficult to navigate the position of out-of-town entrepreneur in a context where so many neighbors are excluded, she wants to give something back to the community. She's thinking about opening a cultural center and creative space for artists, even if it will not be profitable. Perhaps she can finance it with money from her business. Like the landowners who accommodate neighbors on their land, Sonia's desire to contribute signals a longing for spaces that exist outside the logics of profit and the market—outside capitalism.

The global dynamics of permanent impermanence

The dynamics of permanent impermanence I have described in this text are part of a global phenomenon gaining increasing attention. I observed similar dynamics in Longyearbyen (Norway), the second site of my fieldwork, during the pandemic. As the local tourist industry shut down due to travel restrictions, international islanders were offered a one-time grant to cover the travel and accommodation costs of going "home" as residence in Svalbard is conditioned on your financial capacities. While the Svalbardian case is particular in that it is sustained by geopolitical concerns (so was the establishment of El Chaltén), the main logic driving the formation of guest-worker societies globally seems to be the financialization and corporatization of the urban signaled in Saskia Sassen's (2014) work on expulsions (see also Brenner, Marcuse, and Meyer, 2012). Thus, the forced state of permanent impermanence is not exclusively linked to tourism but applies in other areas where "gig-economies" and skyrocketing costs of living fuel the growth of a workforce stuck in states of permanent impermanence. Such is also the case of the "gig-economy", with workers living in their vans, travelling between places in search of temporally circumscribed "work" (portrayed in the 2021 Oscar winner *Nomadland*), or of seasonal migrants moving between countries or regions, working in places where they are usually denied full citizenship. Globally, such states of permanent impermanence are increasingly defining urban life, as real estate prices force all but the wealthiest segments of the workforce on the move in what some refer to as a planetary gentrification process (Smith, 2002). Increasingly, homeownership is becoming a mirage for the middle-classes, including public employees and creative professionals. What kind of future emerges when the people who breathe life into the city are forced out?

In many urban areas the effects of gentrification and real estate financialization are compounded by efforts to preserve the city's green, recreational spaces. This is the case in Oslo, where real estate prices have soared to levels that exclude low- and middle-income professionals (including teachers, nurses, and other public employees) from the housing market. In 2019, Norwegian economists calculated that the prices of real estate in Oslo were 40% higher than they would have been if big real estate investors had not operated in the market. While efforts to preserve natural areas close to Oslo's urban center are commendable, the insistence on protecting the

vast forest that border the wealthy northern neighborhoods of the city contributes to the exclusion of a growing segment of the population, while guaranteeing easy access to the outdoors for Oslo's increasingly affluent population. Again, we observe well-intentioned environmentalism and capitalist dynamics coalesce to produce an aestheticized urban landscape for some and expelling others. Meanwhile, a growing number of Oslo's neighbors rely on mobile solutions such as tiny homes on wheels or boats, showing that El Chaltén's urban dynamics are global in scale. From Argentina to Norway, a growing number of mobile homeowners are caught in states of permanent impermanence, employing different strategies to subsist in a world increasingly shaped by the logics of *green* but primarily *corporate capitalism*.

Conclusion

In this text, I have argued that the mobile homes in El Chaltén should be read as materializations of the romantic pursuit of a life in nature and the increasing understanding of the wilderness as a landscape that needs to be protected from further anthropomorphic processes—even at the cost of expelling the town's residents. I have suggested that the concept of permanent impermanence usefully describes the affective state and way of being in the world that results from a particular ordering of im/mobilization patterns along spatial and temporal dimensions. Referring to emergent dynamics of expulsion and exclusion, it signals the production of a new class of guest workers characterized by a heightened plasticity and pliability—a *lesser human* (Bertelsen, 2021)—in economic systems organized around seasonality or other forms of temporally circumscribed labor and (directly or indirectly) forced migration (e.g. through the denial of access to citizenship or the impossibility of settling down). Importantly, in guest worker societies belonging is determined by one's economic productivity and usefulness in such a way that "home" is always "somewhere else," legitimizing practices of expulsion (i.e. when the "guest worker" is told to "go home").

On an existential level, states of permanent impermanence born out of the impossibility to affirm oneself as an immobile subject (as a neighbor) are accompanied by feelings of being stuck; of not being able to progress with your life projects; of truncated dreams. The concept challenges the distinction between

mobility and immobility by highlighting how im/mobilizations are interwoven and co-constituted processes that only acquire meaning *in relation* to something (Adey, 2006; Franquesa, 2011). Thus, it questions the usefulness of im/mobility as a detached and objective theoretical concept, emphasizing the need to contextualize its application. In El Chaltén we see how the entwinement of modernist fantasies of progress and romantic dreams of a return to nature act as a powerful imaginary that sustains relations of inequality and produces precarity for members of a working- and middle-class stuck in a state of waiting for a future that never arrives. They negotiate their aspirations of dwelling and belonging through material practices that seek to immobilize them in space but provide them with a feeling of existential mobility in the sense of having a life that moves forwards. The mobile homes of El Chaltén show us that it is necessary to ask how understandings of the good life cantered around access to resources, social belonging, human dignity, and the possibility to move forward in life relates to the possibility of settling down, of staying put—of adopting a sedentary way of living.

Bibliography

- Adey, P. (2006). "If mobility is everything then it is nothing: Towards a relational politics of (im) mobilities." *Mobilities* 1(1), 75-94.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489080>
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. New York: Duke University Press.
- Azcárate, M. C. (2020). *Stuck with tourism: Space, power, and labor in contemporary Yucatan*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Baldwin, A., Fröhlich, C., & Rothe, D. (2019). "From climate migration to Anthropocene mobilities: Shifting the debate." *Mobilities* 14(3), 289-297.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2019.1620510>
- Barker, K. (2022). "Awakening from the sleep-walking society: Crisis, detachment and the real in prepper awakening narratives." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40(5), 805-823.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758221123814>
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. New York: Duke University Press.

- Bertelsen, B. E. (2021). "A lesser human? Utopian registers of urban reconfiguration in Maputo, Mozambique." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29(1): 87-107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12988>
- Bianchi, R. V. (2000). "Migrant Tourist-Workers: Exploring the 'Contact Zones' of Post-industrial Tourism." *Current Issues in Tourism*, 3(2), 107-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500008667869>
- Boscoboinik, A., & Cretton, V. (2017). "'Find Your Nature' in the Swiss Alps: In Search of a Better Life in the Mountains." *Český lid*, 104(2), 199-212. <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2017.2.02>
- Brenner, N. (2013). Theses on urbanization. *Public Culture* 25(1), 85-114. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-1890477>
- Brenner, N., Marcuse, P., & Mayer, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Cities for people, not for profit: Critical urban theory and the right to the city*. London: Routledge.
- Büscher, B., & Fletcher, R. (2020). *The conservation revolution: Radical ideas for saving nature beyond the Anthropocene*. London: Verso.
- Chandler, D. (2019). "The death of hope? Affirmation in the Anthropocene." *Globalizations*, 16(5), 695-706. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2018.1534466>
- Cresswell, T. (2006). *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. Winchester: John Hunt Publishing.
- Franquesa, J. (2011). "'We've lost our bearings': Place, tourism, and the limits of the 'mobility turn.'" *Antipode* 43(4), 1012-1033. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00789.x>
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2007). *Lines: A brief history*. London: Routledge.

- Jacobsen, C. M., Karlsen, M. A., & Khosravi, S. (2021). *Waiting and the temporalities of irregular migration*. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, E., & Moorhouse, H. (Eds.). (2014). "After the Anthropocene: Politics and geographic inquiry for a new epoch." *Progress in Human Geography* 38(3), 439-456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132513517065>
- Kalb, D. (2024). *Insidious Capital: Frontlines of Value at the End of the Global Cycle*. New York: Berghahn.
- Kallis, G. (2019). *Limits: Why Malthus was wrong and why environmentalists should care*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lublin, G. (2021). "Adjusting the focus: looking at Patagonia and the wider Argentine state through the lens of settler colonial theory." *Settler Colonial Studies*, 11(3), 386-409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2021.2001961>
- Mendoza, M. (2018). *The Patagonian sublime: the green economy and post-neoliberal politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Picone, S. E. (2020). "Áreas protegidas e acesso à terra: o caso de El Chaltén no Parque Nacional Los Glaciares (Patagônia Argentina)." *Confins*, 47, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.4000/confins.32276>
- Picone, S. E. (2021). "La sustentabilidad del espacio-tiempo para la reproducción de las naturalezas en El Chaltén (Santa Cruz, Argentina)." *Ecología Política*, 61, 85-90. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27120363>
- Picone, S. E., Liscovsky, I.J., & Schweitzer, A. F. (2022). "Entre las fronteras del turismo sustentable: desigualdades, tensiones y continuidades en la producción espacial de El Chaltén (Santa Cruz, Argentina)." *Revista Pueblos y fronteras digital*, 17, 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.22201/cimsur.18704115e.2022.v17.566>
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sassen, S. (2014). *Expulsions: Brutality and complexity in the global economy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). "The new mobilities paradigm." *Environment and planning A*, 38(2), 207-226. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- Smith, D. P. (2002). "Extending the temporal and spatial limits of gentrification: a research agenda for population geographers." *International journal of population geography* 8(6), 385-394. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijpg.267>
- Sokolíčková, Zdenka. (2023). *The paradox of Svalbard: Climate change and globalization in the Arctic*. London: Pluto Press.
- Soronellas-Masdeu, M., & Offenhenden, M. (2023). "Movilidades de Alta Montaña. Una etnografía de la temporalidad en la estación de esquí de la Val d'Aran." *Quaderns de l'Institut Català d'Antropologia*, 38, 231-248. <https://doi.org/10.56247/qua.417>
- Todres, L., and Galvin, K. (2010). "'Dwelling-mobility': An existential theory of well-being." *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, 5(3), 5444. <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v5i3.5444>