

# INTRODUCTION

## Collisions and Transitions

Like a light in space that still shines despite the extinction of its source, traditional historiography's concept of Chile continues to travel, giving rise to a sky full of myths and phantoms, of notions about an entity that never was. The arduous struggle for survival; modernity and its complexities; globalization and its challenges; and the growing inequality that the model has been unable to ameliorate all reveal that such a Chile never existed.

—Rafael Sagredo Baeza

Myth has it that photography arrived in Chile in 1840 on the French school ship *Oriental*. I say myth because María Inez Turazzi has meticulously traced the circumstances of this event and convincingly demonstrates its low probability.<sup>1</sup> To be precise: There is a chance that the first daguerreotype camera did indeed reach the coastal towns of Puerto del Hambre, Talcahuano, and Valparaíso, but the person able to operate the camera, Louis Comte, abandoned the ship before then in Montevideo, Uruguay. What is more, the ship sank shortly after leaving Valparaíso; no traces of photographic equipment or indeed photographs are left. What remains are newspaper reports announcing the arrival of this brand-new technology, preparing their readership for an event that would never happen.

I begin this study on the historiography of photography in Chile with the same anecdote as virtually every text on the topic, from the first history by Eugenio Pereira Salas in 1942 to Hernán Rodríguez Villegas's magisteral register of Chilean photographers in 1985 and several updated works until recently.<sup>2</sup> Such is the implicit feeling of having missed the beginning of something exceptional, of having had the engine stalled by some malicious

fate, that these histories continue to rather impassionately enumerate both another failed attempt to import a camera in 1841 and the establishment of the first photographic studios in the years to follow. Is the origin of Chilean photography—in the sarcastic commentary of Chilean photographer Luis Weinstein—“a very South American act of self-destruction”?<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Chileans had little influence on Comte’s previous abandonment of the *Oriental* and its wreckage. And despite the rocky start, photographic studios set up as quickly as 1842. Chile’s favorable geographic location on the Pacific, the opening of the ports after independence from Spain in 1810, and the subsequent increase in foreign trade and investment connected it to the world economy, particularly to Great Britain and the United States. Industrial goods and technology were imported and fostered the modernization of the country. In respect to visual media, the introduction of photography was of particular importance. Machines and craftsmen to industrially produce graphic reproductions and print illustrated books were scarce.<sup>4</sup> Photography partially remedied this lack, as it did not require large workshops and studios could be set up all over the country. Consequently, from the very beginning, photography was practiced in almost all parts of Chile and in all sectors, for personal, governmental, and economic purposes.

Taking this into account, Chilean writer Rita Ferrer proposes a more nuanced interpretation of the events of the *Oriental*: “For us, those of the New World, photography has its founding myth in travel, in transmigration. A founding myth here, because of the effects of a voyage that provokes a new collision: of the Old and the New World. . . . As a transition, too, of the colonial world toward the postcolonial which marks our modernity.”<sup>5</sup> Ferrer’s words suggest that photography, as a product and trigger of an encounter, transmigration, and historical transition, has the potential to tell the story of a nation and its people through changing periods and paradigms. These are also the aspects that I set out to discuss and which guide my analysis of the theoretical and practical conditions of Chilean photography over more than a century.

## Chile, 2019

The research for this book, too, is the product of several trips to Chile, during the last of which a considerable collision took place and which should alter the frame of investigation: the *estallido social* (social uprising) in October 2019. The rise of the cost of public transportation triggered protests initiated by high school students and in which very quickly large groups of Chilean society



Figure I.1. The largest protest during the *estallido social* on October 25, 2019. Photograph by Matthias Pfaller.

joined throughout Chile. In virtually every town, tens of thousands of people gathered to denounce the effects of ultra-neoliberal politics and economics set in place during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1989). The return to democracy in 1990 changed little, amounting to decades of social impoverishment and a deep mistrust in politics (the slogan of the protests became “It is not 30 pesos [the rise of the metro ticket], but 30 years”). Almost overnight, people took to the streets carrying banners with their demands to the government, clearly spelling out the deficits concerning all aspects of life: low wages and pensions; a privatized health system; extractive ecocidal industries; the suppression of Indigenous communities, people of color, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community; and the monopoly of wealth of a few families.<sup>6</sup> The protests were met with brutal repression, as President Sebastián Piñera handed over the control of the capital Santiago to the military during the first week—for the first time since the dictatorship. Dozens were killed under dubious circumstances, and targeted police attacks cost hundreds of protesters partial or total loss of sight.<sup>7</sup> For months, until the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 sent the population into lockdowns, the protests agitated the country.

The largest single demonstration happened a mere week after the outbreak of the protests, on October 25, 2019, at the Plaza Italia in the center of Santiago, with an official estimate of 1.2 million participants.<sup>8</sup> People gathered around and atop the statue of General Manuel Baquedano, a decisive figure in the 1879–1884 War of the Pacific, in which Chile conquered vast territories from Bolivia and Peru (see fig. I.1). Under the gray spring sky and the city’s notorious air pollution, the Andes and the massive, snow-covered peak of Cerro El Plomo were but faintly visible. It was the largest protest ever held in Chile, and the entire area around the central square, the adjacent parks and the main avenue Alameda, were covered in a myriad of flags, whose colors set themselves off against the smog and dim social climate. Next to the official flags of Chile and the orange-and-black and black-and-white flags of football clubs, the most ubiquitous was the *Wenüfoye*, the flag of the Indigenous Mapuche communities. The *Wenüfoye* features the colors blue, green, and red, the yellow *kultrún* (the circle representing a percussion instrument with the four cardinal points of Mapuche knowledge), and black and white stripes with the *guemil*, the Andean cross. The spontaneously held manifestation was without specific leadership and gathered a wide range of social groups. The impression was an overwhelming mixture of the unity against the political system and the diversity of the population.

As in other events around the world from the past decade, photography acquired a key function in personal mass communication. Pictures like mine of the protests, as well as of banners, graffiti, performances, and the continuous police brutality, circulated widely in social networks. They informed the participants of the current events when the private news channels would push their own narrative or stop covering the protests. They called for new gatherings, documented what happened, and extended the sphere of the protests from concentrated points in the streets to an (inter)national audience. Most importantly, the circulation of certain motifs gave rise to recognizable symbols that created a sense of community, reinforced the political demands, and fostered a social exchange.<sup>9</sup>

In spontaneous communal assemblies, the *cabildos*,<sup>10</sup> people of all classes and professions discussed the country’s situation and possible measures to improve on it. It was nothing short of a rethinking and refounding of the nation: Who shall have a say in it, who does it belong to? Against the backdrop of a white *criollo* history concentrating power in the hands of a few, a multifaceted democratic movement awakened. Confronted with ongoing resistance, the government agreed to the drafting of a new constitution to replace the

one implemented by Pinochet's administrators. In the momentum of the protests, a constitutional convention was elected, with a majority of progressive representatives and, importantly, members of Indigenous communities. Their proposal was a radical reformulation of civic rights, from Indigenous self-administration to workers' rights and environmental protection. After a heated campaign leading up to a plebiscite in September 2022, however, it was rejected; a newly elected convention consisted of mostly right-wing representatives who from the outset tried to impede changes to the status quo. Their draft, too, was rejected, and Pinochet's constitution remains in place. Another "South American act of self-destruction?"<sup>11</sup> the supporters of the protests might ask.

Notwithstanding the severe stifling of the political momentum of the *estallido*, the national question continues to be discussed. The discontent with monocultural, neoliberal politics that marginalizes the poor and the Indigenous population that was so visible in the streets remains palpable in the thinking about the makeup of Chilean society. As Claudio Alvarado Lincopi writes, "Plural desires appear in the political debate. And this is when plurinationality emerges as a power. It appears in the local political language, opening possibilities for the encounter and coexistence of diverse historical trajectories within the same political community, thus overcoming the old national script of stubborn white, elite homogeneity."<sup>12</sup> The Mapuche thinker proposes plurinationality as an antidote to the hegemonic logic of exclusion, which hitherto determined Chilean nationhood and which favored a Eurocentric, capitalist elite. In addition to promoting inclusiveness of diverse and distinct voices, the concept also offers a way to rethink particularly Indigenous identity within a social reality consisting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and cultures: "It can be a channel of memory against the indigenous denial in the body of the mestizaje, an opportunity to rethink the frameworks of the Chilean nation, one where getting 'stained with Indian,' embracing the *champurra* is a flow to its own redefinitions."<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the social crisis and its massive visual activity, Ferrer's statement on photography can be extended to its contemporary functions: It testifies to the collision of two worlds, the ancient dominant elite and the popular classes, and plays a key role in the transition to a politically engaged population that becomes visible on a wide scale. In this vein, writing about the "national" history of photography becomes utterly topical. Yet it is also a question of principle: Is the paradigm of the nation an adequate framework for a contemporary study? Not only in the case of Chile but anywhere,

researchers address the foundations of the genre of photographic histories by questioning the dominant narrative, its geopolitical scope, and the very subject itself, the nature of photography.<sup>14</sup> As François Brunet wrote, “The kind of oppositions that matter most in the contemporary critique of visual culture are supra-national (North/South, West/East) as well as infra-national and societal (race, class, gender), rather than (inter-)national.”<sup>15</sup> The nation seems at the same time too small and too big to accommodate manifold photographers, photographs, and their sociopolitical contexts.

In response to these tendencies, I argue that precisely because of the current topicality of the idea of the nation and its alternatives, notably plurinationality, the analysis of how this nation came into existence in the first place is a productive approach to the topic. By looking at the diverse people and institutions and their goals and strategies, it becomes clearer where the cracks of the concept are, which then and now have given rise to struggles of sovereignty, self-determination, and visibility. The concentration of the protests around the statue of General Baquedano is exemplary for the importance of historical memory that was ubiquitous in the crisis’s visual manifestation. The monument was installed in 1928 to honor a history of elitist, military power over Chile’s neighbors and domestic Indigenous enemies; in March 2021, the sculpture was removed from its pedestal to be restored after one and a half years of protesters appropriating the site and fitting it out with their flags and graffiti reckoning with the violent *criollo* past. The myriad of images circulating on social networks of the interventions on this monument and many other symbols of the state relate directly to the historical photographs of them in Chilean archives. The means to understand this historical substratum of contemporary imaginary, and its transitions and collisions, is a history of photography of Chile.

### Photography in Chile

An inconspicuous but nevertheless immensely telling object from the history of Chilean photography is a postcard sent on November 3, 1898, from the southern city of Temuco to Santiago (fig. I.2). Two photographs, decoratively pasted together, show two Mapuche women braiding hair and the bridge over the Río Malleco near the city of Collipulli. The card was written by a certain Julie to Mr. Petersen, informing him about the engagement of a third person, Peter. As mundane as this object is, it is indicative of the dynamics of national development and photographic practices. Indeed, it combines nearly all of the topics discussed throughout this book: the representation of the Indigenous population, the promotion of technical progress, the pictorial formation of