Mythical Infrastructuring
The Work of Stories in the Making of the Chacao Bridge, Southern Chile

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Abstract: The very nature of large-scale infrastructure projects—long design and construction periods, high investment, and impact on social and natural spaces—makes them prone to socioecological and technical conflicts. These conflicts materialize in stories that become keystones in the making of infrastructure. In this article, we analyze the infrastructuring power of stories by drawing on the case of the Chacao Bridge on Chiloé Island in southern Chile, a controversial infrastructure project that has been in the making over the last six decades. We argue that the “absence” of the bridge creates a space for the production of stories on the island’s inherited past and imagined future that keeps recurring and growing in the form of myths. Thus, we propose the concept of “mythical infrastructuring” to capture this process. We then conclude by arguing that the Chacao Bridge project develops its infrastructuring presence over landscape and culture in contradictory ways that cannot be solved technically or symbolically.

Keywords: Chacao Bridge, Chiloé Island, controversy, culture, infrastructure, myth, nature

Large-scale infrastructure projects are designed to help people live their daily lives in spatially and temporally unique settings, enacting modalities of political planning, cultural belonging, and territorial governance. They are built on the brink of uncertainty, as they require adapting to socioecological environments and are always underwritten by improvised practices, local knowledge, and historical experiences that lie outside their scientific and technical parameters (Scott 1998). Infrastructure projects also produce social conflicts between actors with different interests and backgrounds, whereby the boundaries between nature and culture, past and future, are constantly tested (Harvey and Knox 2012; Henke and Sims 2020; Jensen 2015; Kallianos 2018; Rest and Rippa 2019). These conflicts are certainly triggered by material and technical concerns—locations, materials, designs, budgets—but also by the fact that infrastructure projects, from their inception, are
multilayered assemblages of controversial stories that express social, political, and cultural disputes over modes of understanding and *infrastructuring* socioecological spaces (Moss 2020).

Drawing on related literature, in-depth interviews, press documents, and historical and technical files, we study the case of the Chacao Bridge in southern Chile, a state-sponsored project to connect Chiloé Island with the continent via the largest suspension bridge in Latin America (2,754 meters). The construction of the bridge over the Chacao Channel has been planned, suspended, and replanned over the last 60 years, thereby pervading the social, political, and cultural life of the island with multiple stories of ancient and historical times, political narratives of progress, and technical promises of a better, global life. The construction of the bridge finally began in 2018 as the central pillar was assembled on the so-called “Swirl Rock” (Roca Remolino), a geological formation in the middle of the channel, which is a sacred location in the Williche (Indigenous inhabitants of the island) worldview and, at the same time, the technical condition of possibility for the construction of the bridge.

Accordingly, in this article we argue that large-scale infrastructure projects can be studied as storytelling machines whose meaning is condensed into the form of a myth—in our case, an Indigenous myth of the origin of Chiloé Island, a secular myth about the progress of the nation-state, and a modern myth about the technical excellence of the bridge’s engineering design model. Consequently, we propose the notion of *mythical infrastructuring* as a heuristic device that aims to capture the connection between the immanent experience of the concrete world and the transcendental worldviews linked to not-yet-physically-existent objects. In this regard, we are building upon the work of Timothy Moss (2020) on the processes of infrastructuring nature as a constitutive condition of urban landscapes. Given that the Chacao Bridge on Chiloé Island is not an urban settlement, we extend Moss’s approach on infrastructuring nature to rural areas, and as our case involves the clash between Indigenous and secular myths, we go beyond the physical and institutional dimensions of the infrastructuring process by unpacking the fundamental struggle between the experience of local cultures and conflicting value-loaded projections concerning the future organization of social life. To this end, we focus on the work of stories in shaping interstitial spaces and colliding temporalities where infrastructures are called into being but do not yet exist. In these cases, the infrastructuring power does not lie in transforming or enhancing the consolidated existence of a visible physical structure (a road, a bridge, a
power station, a utility network), but rather in the narrative structure of an imagined object that, nevertheless, sets in motion an infrastructuring process with profound consequences for both landscape and culture.

The article is organized into four parts. First, we offer a conceptual outline of the relations between infrastructure projects and the construction of stories around them. Second, we offer a brief characterization of Chiloé Island and describe the materials we use to explore the stories about the Chacao Bridge. Third, we reconstruct three stories from historical and contemporary actors in which the Indigenous myth of the origin of the island, the secular myth of progress, and the modern myth of the excellence of the bridge’s engineering design model are reviewed and analyzed. Fourth, we discuss the performative capacities of the stories regarding the natural, social, and technical aspects of the bridge’s construction. Finally, we draw conclusions from our analysis.

Marking Out Boundaries: Mythical Infrastructuring

Since Susan Leigh Star’s (1999) seminal article on the ethnography of infrastructures, the field of research has expanded so much that scholars even speak of an infrastructural turn in the social sciences (Amin 2014). Although definitions of what infrastructure is, what it is for, and how it works remain elusive and depend on disciplinary emphases and intellectual traditions, Brian Larkin argues that a minimum common denominator is that infrastructure facilitates flows and exchanges which “create the grounds on which other objects operate” (2013: 329). The broad literature has at least four commonly shared assumptions based on this general view. First, infrastructural systems are deeply implicated in organizing (and disrupting) everyday life in modern societies and in shaping understandings of temporality, development, maintenance, and well-being (Denis and Pontille 2019; Velhoa and Ureta 2019). Second, rather than discrete and stable objects, infrastructures are dynamic “extended material assemblages” that continuously enable and transform social environments, cultural practices, economic processes, and political institutions (Cass et al. 2018; Harvey et al. 2017). Third, infrastructures are contradictory fields of relations—visible and invisible, solid and fragile, local and global, past and future—which “produce contradictions and unevenly felt consequences in the lives and places they contact” (Howe et al. 2016: 549). And fourth, one of their main outcomes is the infrastructuring process that lies behind the building of physical objects, that is, infrastructures work as “mediators of social
and biophysical relations, [they emphasize] how these relations are historically shaped” (Moss 2020: 31). Thus, the physical forms of infrastructures not only embody elements that are factually real, but their material composition elicits versions of what the world “is” and what it can possibly be, thereby connecting the immanent experience of actors with rather transcendental worldviews (McCaffree 2022).

As in the case of established infrastructures, large-scale infrastructure projects play a crucial role in constructing sociotechnical imaginaries and narratives of past and future social life, particularly regarding socioecological landscapes (Jasanoff 2015; Jensen and Morita 2017). This means that infrastructure projects attain an infrastructuring power through the practical mobilization of local cultures and collective “visions of desirable futures” that shape “how life ought, or ought not, to be lived” (Jasanoff 2015: 4). In the face of unstable forces and material uncertainty, infrastructures “emerge as a form of social promise” (Harvey and Knox 2012: 525–526). Although infrastructural promises may become dominant narratives, they always trigger disputes over the marking out of spatial and temporal boundaries and thus contain within themselves the movement of history deployed in the form of stories that work upon fragments of earlier stories. This very accumulation of stories “fitted together in makeshift fashion” (De Certeau 2011: 213) gives life to infrastructures even before they achieve material existence.

This necessarily leads to reconsidering the work that stories perform in the making of both infrastructures and socioecological landscapes. Stories are not static narrative bodies that represent reality. Rather, they play a fundamental role in the infrastructuring processes, as they are place-based practices and event-driven forms of experiencing and describing the world and its conflicts (Moss 2020: 305–306). Stories perform the work of delimitating boundaries that “authorize the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits,” insofar as they are “actuated by a contradiction that is represented in them by the relationship between a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority” (De Certeau 2011: 123, 126).

The case of the Chacao Bridge in Chiloé brings an additional element to the study of infrastructures: the presence of myths that are actualized by the idea of the infrastructural project. Although existing literature takes notice of the interplay of infrastructures with ritual practices and religious beliefs (Bonelli and González 2017; Ishii 2017; Sizek 2021), there is no direct engagement with how the interaction between narrations and infrastructure projects shapes specific spaces and local temporalities.
Anthropologists observe that myths are social forms of describing and inscribing material features of particular territories (e.g., stones, lakes, hills, rivers) on stories of a shared landscape (Kahn 1990; Klenk 2018; Malinowski 2005; Rodman 1992; Turnbull 2007). Furthermore, as remarked by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955), myths depict the dispute between conflicting elements that define fundamental aspects of life for Indigenous people and invoke hybrid mediators to bring about a symbolic resolution of those tensions. In doing so, myth produces significant outcomes whose true substance lies “in the story which it tells” (1955: 430). Myth is thus a form of language not exclusively related to Indigenous people. As Roland Barthes (1972) argues, myths emerge when communication transforms meaning into form by naturalizing it. The myth condenses the signifier, the signified, and the sign into a signifying function: the myth itself. It hides nothing: it neither lies nor confesses but rather transforms history into a naturally given event that is read as a factual system (and not as a semiological one), as in the modern myth of inevitable progress or the ancient myths of origin: “Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made” (1972: 142). Thus, the myth condenses immanent experiences and transcendental beliefs into one single entity: the form of the myth. Consequently, eventful stories and the accumulation of “several layers of meaning over time” recreate the myth (Della Dora 2009: 109). The narration of mythical stories always entails the composition of multiple visions that perform the boundaries of objects in dispute (Keulartz 2007; Weiland 2007) and may also help to deal with present needs by introducing marginal variations around the fundamental narrative core (Blumenberg 1990).

Drawing on these considerations, we approach the study of the Chacao Bridge by exploring the interaction between myth and infrastructure. Our analysis focuses on the infrastructuring power of stories around a “not yet” existent object that, at different stages and in a variety of forms, recreate the experience of multiple conflicts that define the life of Chiloé Island. We thus propose to understand the projection of the bridge as a mythical infrastructuring process that enacts and confronts the Indigenous myth of the origins of the Island with the modern myth of progress and technical excellence. To capture such a dynamic around the Chacao Bridge, the stories we reproduce are collective narrations that have become commonly shared knowledge. Although they all refer to the same conflictual and contested landscape, they move through different temporalities, attribute agencies to human and non-human entities, and connect various natural, political, and technical
problems to one another. This multilayered composition is a signature of what we call “mythical infrastructuring.”

The Case of the Chacao Bridge on Chiloé Island

Chiloé Island is located between latitudes 41°4’ and 43°2’ S in southern Chile (Figure 1). It is a place with rich biodiversity and cultural identity. Until 1970, it was mainly a rural province whose economy was based on agriculture and artisanal fishing. From the 1980s onward, it experienced a process of accelerated modernization encouraged by the Chilean state through market-oriented policies and discourses of national integration and progress. In a few decades, Chiloé became a leading center of the transnational salmon industry (Hosono et al. 2016) and a fertile terrain for mining and energy projects, industrial fishing, land markets, and international tourism. This constellation of centralized state practices and globalized streams of extractive industries has created a conflictual landscape full of ecological, social, and political frictions (Barton and Roman 2016).

The idea of a bridge over the Chacao Channel has been several decades in the making. Initially proposed by the local politician Félix

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**Figure 1** Locations of Chiloé and the Chacao Channel. Elaboration by Claudia Alonso.
Garay in the 1960s as a solution to Chiloé’s problems of connectivity, the Chacao Bridge has remained a controversial idea and a symbol of the contradictions that have radically altered the socioecological and cultural life of the island (Bustos and Román 2019; Mascareño et al. 2018, 2020). Technical, economic, political, and epistemic controversies prevented the bridge’s construction for decades until 2018, when a transnational consortium led by the Korean technology company Hyundai began work (Figure 2).

The bridge’s location was technically decided due to the existence of the above-mentioned Swirl Rock (Roca Remolino), a subaquatic solid formation of volcanic origin located in the Chacao Channel at 1,155 meters from the continent and 1,055 meters from Chiloé Island (MOP 2012). The rock is crucial for engineering calculations, as it is the site for the location of the bridge’s central pillar. Without it, the bridge itself could not be possible at all. And yet, what gives a rather meaningful spatial anchoring to the bridge is that the Chacao Channel—particularly the Swirl Rock—is also a foundational site for Chiloé’s cultural identity.

For the analysis of the case, we considered three independent datasets. First, as part of a broader research project on Chiloé Island, we conducted 83 in-depth interviews with different social actors between 2016 and 2020. For this analysis, we used selected interviews (12 in Figure 2 | Overview of the Construction Site, Chacao Channel (October 2020). Photograph by Mathias Jacob, February 2017.)
total) with members of four groups that relate to the Chacao Bridge: social movements, political institutions, Indigenous groups, and technical and scientific organizations. These interviews were processed using the Atlas.ti software program. Second, we collected around 500 press documents from local and national newspapers covering different dimensions of Chiloé’s social life in the last 40 years. For this research, we analyzed around 50 relevant sources related to the construction of the Chacao Bridge. And third, we reviewed historical and technical files (text and audiovisual material) on the Chacao Channel’s history and the technical specifications of the bridge’s construction.

Stories over Stories: The Narrative Structure of the Chacao Bridge

This section recounts some stories that may help us understand the interaction of myth and infrastructure in the construction of the Chacao Bridge. We organize them around three collections of stories: Indigenous views (the myth of origin), political imaginaries (the myth of progress), and engineering designs (the myth of excellence).

The Swirl Rock: The Myth of Origin

According to the island’s Indigenous mythology, the Swirl Rock (the location of the bridge’s central pillar) is the site where Caicai Vilú, the god-serpent of water and marine species, and Tenten Vilú, the god-serpent of land, fought a cosmic battle that gave birth to the Chiloé Archipelago. The story tells that Caicai Vilú decided to punish humankind for abandoning the sea and moving to dry land. Emerging from the depths of the sea, Caicai Vilú flooded the entire land, thus drowning the humans. In response, Tenten Vilú raised the earth’s surface to create hills and heights where humankind could take refuge. The highlands surrounded by the sea became the Chiloé Archipelago, where some primordial couples survived, while those who did not reach the highlands became fish, marine animals, and rocks (Barruel 2017; Cárdenas 1998). From the Indigenous point of view, similar signs of flooding that resemble the original mythological fight appeared in the last several years in Chiloé’s landscape. As a Williche woman argues in an interview:

Nowadays, the sea rises, and the tides far exceed the demarcated borders. That means that the island is not on the right track; essential events are
coming, things that can happen if the irregularities, the invasion, and the lack of respect for the native people and their beliefs continue. I fully disagree when they say that the Swirl Rock can be a fundamental pillar of the bridge. They do not know what they may encounter. They are invading and underestimating the part of our history related to the spirits and values that we, as native people, assign to those places. (Williche woman 1)

For Indigenous people, “the sea will not allow the bridge to be built” because the Swirl Rock “comes and goes with the tide; it is not a fixed stone; and they are building their bridge on it” (Williche woman 1). Another Indigenous woman contends: “The foreigners do not care if spiritual ceremonies are held here at the rock by the seamen, by the Williche. The only thing they see is that there is a rock that serves them as a pillar” (Williche woman 2). Similarly, a fisherman argues: “I grew up with the story of the bridge. It has been going on for more than 50 years. It is sad because today we do not have the culture we had before. With the bridge, we will have very little culture left on the island” (fishermen 1). And another fisherman concludes: “With a bridge, we would no longer be an island” (fishermen 2).

The importance of the Swirl Rock for Chiloé Island has also left its mark in historical records on maritime tragedies of sailors trying to reach the other side of the Chacao Channel. At least since the mid-sixteenth century (De Ercilla 2001: 355; Vásquez de Acuña 1978: 133–134), Spanish settlers often reported stories of shipwrecked crews that could not avoid “a hazardous rock (peñón) halfway through the channel which can only be seen when there are low tides” (De Ulloa and De Ulloa 1826: 48). Even Darwin’s visit to Chiloé Island in 1834 left a record on “many vessels having been lost, owing to the dangerous currents and rocks in the straits” (2008: 399–400).

In 1856, native Chiloé sailor Francisco Hudson was entrusted by maritime authorities with the task of “exploring the Swirl Rock . . . and suggesting a way to beacon it with a bell-shaped buoy” (Sepúlveda Ortiz 1998: 555). At the time, the Chacao Channel was mostly uncharted territory to the Chilean Armada and Chiloé’s intendant had heard reports about the dangers of the rock and wanted to implement a solution. Hudson proposed anchoring an iron barge to the rock and equipping it with a stick 20- to 30-feet tall with a light on top. This small infrastructural solution was never implemented. To this very day, divers find new sunken ships whose wrecks may be related to either the Swirl Rock or the turbulent tides of the Chacao Channel (Escafandra 2013). Storms and high tides are still important problems for today’s ferry travel companies in charge of transportation between Chiloé and
the mainland. In different conversations, interviewees reenacted stories combining the difficulties of people unable to cross from one side to the other because of weather conditions and the foundational Indigenous myth associated with the Swirl Rock.

The myth of origin takes on new life with the bridge’s construction. Its narration condenses the natural landscape, the rock, the early attempts at infrastructuring nature, the immanent historical and present experience around it, and the transcendental Indigenous views on the location site. They are presented as a factual system in the sense argued by Barthes (1972), a system that may even prevent—as Indigenous people contend—“the bridge to be built. [For] invading a space and not asking permission does not only have to do with the island’s original inhabitants. In our culture, you must ask permission to enter the sea because there are protective spirits” (Williche woman 1).

Political Imaginaries: The Myth of Progress

In the early 1960s, the connectivity of far-south regions became a crucial symbol of progress and sovereignty for the Chilean state. To achieve this goal, the Parliament proposed replacing an old ferry service—active since 1927—with a barge system to connect Chiloé with the mainland through the Chacao Channel (BCN 1965a). In this debate, the local congressman for Chiloé, Félix Garay, proposed a daring idea to solve the problem: constructing a bridge (BCN 1965b). Garay was nicknamed “the crazy man of the bridge” (el loco del puente) in the Chilean political scene. As a former Chilean politician recalls in an interview:

When debates in Congress had to be prolonged for some tactical reason and it was necessary to fill some time, they used to say to Garay: “Come on Garay! Say something about the bridge.” There is folklore around it. (Chilean politician 1)

The Chacao Bridge was officially proposed in 1972 and designed by the Chilean engineer Francisco Carvajal (Carrasco 2002). Thus, it was born from the intersection between one of the most classically modernizing state narratives of progress and the ridiculing of the idea in Parliament. This gave the bridge the duality of a myth: it was the most relevant symbol of progress for the island, yet at the same time it was madness, the unfeasible project of a crazy person who was only listened to by bored congressmen when wanting to fill empty time.

Since its inception, the project of the Chacao Bridge has fought against its improbability. While during Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship
(1973–1989) the modernizing focus was put on the installation of the global salmon industry around the island, the project of the bridge was reinstated under Eduardo Frei’s presidency (1994–2000) in July 1997 as “a contribution of his government to the country” (Cámara de Diputados 2006: 10), and continued under Ricardo Lagos’s administration (2000–2006), with Lagos framing it as “a state project” that would increase Chile’s territorial extension and progress. Nearly $17 million were invested in engineering studies and another $20 million in a bidding process won by an international consortium. In 2005, speaking from an exploration platform over the legendary Swirl Rock months before finishing his term, President Lagos announced: “From the Chacao Channel, I can tell all people of Chile that dreams come true” (Lagos, cited in Aqua 2011).

However, because of high financial costs, the bridge’s construction was canceled by President Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010). Among those who supported the decision, a former Chilean Senator depicted the political stakes with eloquence: “We have built a myth that does not solve the connectivity problem and also deprives other regions of projects that could solve many social problems and improve people’s quality of life” (Cámara de Diputados 2006: 15).

The controversy was rekindled when Sebastián Piñera, during his first presidency (2010–2014), brought back the idea of the bridge in 2011. For Piñera, the bridge was a “concrete demonstration of the [government’s] commitment to development and overcoming poverty” and “a great legacy” for the nation (Piñera, cited in Aqua 2011), while for his opponents the construction was nothing but pure populist irresponsibility and an “emblem for presidential indulgence” (cited in CNN 2013). The project moved forward through a new international bidding process and was awarded to a consortium led by Hyundai and the Brazilian company OAS in 2013. Since then—and after removing OAS in 2017 for being involved in corruption cases in Chilean politics—the infrastructural dimension of the bridge has become increasingly real through preparatory technical studies, international contracts, and engineering designs. The array of machinery and workers deployed on the Chacao Channel to lay the foundations of the bridge was finally put in place in 2018.

In this case, the myth of progress for the island came from political and state narratives. The myth also condenses the natural landscape, the recent attempts of infrastructuring nature through the bridge project, the political experience in the national Parliament, exorbitant economic flows, and transcendental values that pervade the promises
of modernization. The factual outcome of these two narratives and the ensuing myth is that the bridge is inevitable, “a dream come true.” It can be madness, extremely expensive, and politically risky. However, since its political inception as a sign of progress for the island in the 1960s, it has become mythically real as a process of infrastructuring nature through stories of progress and national unity.

**Engineering Design: The Myth of Excellence**

The production of artistic representations, technical renders, and other avatars have become increasingly significant tools to envision the bridge as the result of engineering design’s victory over the forces of the natural and the social world. The design of the current bridge was developed between 2014 and 2016 by a cross-national team of engineers located in Seoul, London, Berlin, and Santiago. After its final approval, the model design was received with great political expectations. As a former deputy minister of public works expressed, the design meant the beginning of another story because “when the engineering was finished, we had a bridge. Now we just need to build it!” (Chilean politician 2). Although it still was not built, the bridge was becoming a fact.

The performative capacity of the design model can be expressively seen as the chief engineer of the project, Matías Valenzuela, received the *Be Inspired* award in London in 2016 from Bentley Systems, a British software company specialized in solutions for the design and management of infrastructure projects (Valenzuela 2016). Valenzuela’s presentation not only showcases the main engineering features of the Chacao Bridge with the aid of cutting-edge software, sophisticated laboratory-scale modeling, demanding design codes gathered from around the world, and expensive field explorations and measurements. He also explains the challenge of infrastructuring nature in an unlikely place to build a suspension bridge of almost three kilometers of extension: strong winds of up to 180 kilometers an hour, wild ocean currents, and highly seismic geological conditions. The technical excellence of the model is adapted to manage these natural forces.

Of all the design challenges, Valenzuela highlights the one posed by the Swirl Rock. The foundations of the whole project quite literally depend on knowing the rock’s composition, testing its strength and behavior, and experimenting with materials and machinery to embed 36 piles at a depth of 40–50 meters down this natural rock formation (Valenzuela and Márquez 2014; Syngros et al. 2008). He also explains that there is no possibility of gathering all the geotechnical information
before construction because of the tight deadlines of complex projects like this one. So data collection has to be completed in the making (Peña et al. 2017). In this challenging context, the international prize awarded to the technical excellence of the design model contributes to building the facticity of the bridge, as it produces a public proof that the bridge will exist and “last at least a hundred years” (Bentley 2017). The acknowledged excellence of the design shapes the facticity of the bridge. Valenzuela (2016) reinforces this by listing the positive outcomes that the bridge will eventually bring to Chiloé inhabitants (reduction of travel times, the attraction of new professionals, improved communications and trade) and detailing how the bridge’s design is extremely careful with plants, trees, animals, and archeological sites, and with unprecedented advantages for the island’s own culture: “This culture cannot be eliminated . . . We want to preserve it [and] use the bridge to take that culture to the mainland.”

In this case, the myth of excellence of the design model condenses many layers of the infrastructuring process: the natural landscape (the channel, the rock, the seafloor, the flora and fauna), natural forces (winds, currents, seismic movements), advanced technical tools and scientific knowledge (cutting-edge software, complex calculations), the attribution of social experiences to Chiloé inhabitants (travel, trade, time pressure), and their local knowledge and culture. Natural objects and forces, as well as experiences and the transcendence of culture, become unified and controlled by the sign of the excellence of the design. By narrating this myth, the bridge also works as a factual system.

Discussion

If stories work as performative devices that unify the immanent world and different transcendental views into a myth, the project of the Chacao Bridge plays a central role in the process of infrastructuring Chiloé’s spatial and temporal boundaries. It appears in the three myths as a defining element of the stories. In the Indigenous myth of origin, the project is a negative force against which spirits and gods must fight; in the myth of progress, it is the element that embodies the modernization of the island and its belonging to the sovereign nation-state; and in the myth of excellence, it reflects the efficiency of the technical realm in controlling nature and culture. The three myths operate as factual systems in Barthes’s sense (1972)—that is, as naturalized devices that condense multiple meanings into the form of the myth. Consequently,
they present as a fact (necessity, non-contingency) the story told in the narrations: the spirits actually prevent the construction of the bridge, progress truly prevails over tradition and insularity, and the excellence of the design effectively overcomes the challenges posed by natural and cultural forces. This is the meaningful basis for the mythical infra-structuring of nature and society through the stories about the project of the Chacao Bridge. It condenses the immanence of the world with transcendental worldviews produced by different actors.

The infrastructuring power of the bridge’s project works upon the Swirl Rock, the second element activated in this infrastructuring process. The rock precedes the project of the bridge temporarily but not narratively, for the project brings the rock’s historical meanings and performative force to the fore. The rock thus becomes the material node connecting different worlds (cultural, political, technical) and times (both geological and historical); it links the analog time of explorations with the digital time of software design and monetary calculations; and it also allows for the transtemporal interaction of human (sailors, explorers, Indigenous people, Chiloé inhabitants, presidents) and non-human agents (gods, nature, software, transnational companies). Thus, the rock becomes a free-floating structure throughout the stories, a narrative entity that can be used in different times and situations (Della Dora 2009).

A third element in the infrastructuring process is drawing spatial boundaries between the island and the mainland. Historically, Chiloé’s insularity has been a relevant factor in preserving Indigenous belief systems. Popular religious practices, oral traditions, witchcraft, and an extensive catalog of mythological beings associated with natural spaces (water, sea, channels, forest, land) constitute the identitarian corpus of the island (Barruel 2017; Cárdenas 1998; Miller 2021; Rojas 2002; Véliz 1999). However, from the 1960s, following political processes of state-building and tourism, this corpus has been confronted with national interests and transnational flows of the global economy. In recent literature, the conflict is often framed in terms of the success of extractive industries in taking over the land and sea of Chiloé and threatening the sense of islandness (Baldacchino 2017; Conkling 2007) that is arguably so crucial to its cultural identity (Barton and Roman 2016). From this perspective, local knowledge is disempowered and characterized as exotic. The infrastructuring process of the bridge brings to the fore this dramatic conflict in the form of myths: the myth of origin, which embodies the sense of islandness of a territory with living local traditions and extremely rich nature, and the myths of progress
and technical excellence that represent the inevitable force of modern politics and the global economy. Through these myths, actors deal with significant changes in social life (Blumenberg 1990) but also reproduce the historical conflict that traverses Chiloé’s history.

A fourth element of the infrastructuring process is the temporalization that the project of the bridge sets into motion. The myth of origin refers to the ontological, transtemporal beginnings of Chiloé Island; the myth of progress frames the project’s origin according to a political imaginary that reenacts the promise of modernization; and the myth of excellence of the design model combines the geological times of the formation of the island with the beginning of the material existence of the bridge in 2018 while it also envisions a future in which the spatial difference between island and mainland vanishes because of the bridge. These temporal beginnings and projections may collide, but they complement each other in the infrastructuring process. The transtemporal beginning of the myth of origin foresees a future in which the sense of islandness and cultural identity are reproduced, while both the myth of progress and the myth of excellence of the design model are aimed at integrating the differences into the universal narratives of the nation-state and globalism, respectively. Mythical infrastructuring processes deal not only with spatial but also with temporal boundaries that are contained in the narrative structure of the different stories.

The conflict between distinct mythical forms shows that the bridge—even before coming into concrete existence—is overloaded by both immanent (earthly life) and transcendental (production of meaning, morality, religion) dimensions of social life (Luhmann 2013). Throughout these stories, the project of the bridge constructs its own conflictive, dual existence: it has lived many lives and has also fallen many times. Somehow, its contradictory presence (unreal and real at the same time) has contributed to shaping conceptions about Chiloé’s history, its territory, and the governance of its socioecological landscape. The project is a concrete landmark of social and economic integration for politicians and engineers, while for others it means the dissolution of its cultural identity and transcendental worldviews. The Swirl Rock works for Indigenous people as a transcendental pillar of Chiloé’s society and culture, while for engineers it is a material foundation for the bridge’s construction. For politicians, the bridge represents the secular transcendental value of progress, while for Chiloé inhabitants it is the end of any possible experience of the island as such. Furthermore, the engineers’ narrative can cover the whole temporality of the location site, from geological and historical times to the present. At the same
time, the Indigenous myth of origin accomplishes the same function in a transcendental way.

A salient feature of mythical infrastructuring processes is their ability to connect transcendence and immanence into one single entity. However, in so doing they reduce their margins of adaptation to conceive the world otherwise (contingency). Thus, people must deal with the unfamiliar rather reactively—that is, by resisting both epistemologically and politically a foreign object appropriating it with categories of local knowledge. This may reproduce local cultures in unexpected ways. When inhabitants of Chiloé describe the bridge as a myth, they translate the promises of progress, sovereignty, connectivity, and global integration associated with the bridge into local narrations as a negative projection of their future. For them, the project of the bridge intervenes in sacred sites (the Swirl Rock), alters nature (flooding), and destroys the sense of islandness (the bridge to the mainland). In this way, islanders situate the projected infrastructure in relation to their local knowledge and culture: they resist it by appropriating it as a myth, as a story, and as a possible future that can be politically rejected. Chilote writer Héctor Véliz (2010) has vividly represented this contradictory form of resistance and appropriation in one of his narrations on the island’s present:

The story of the bridge over the Chacao Channel, which comes from who knows what political campaign, is now a relic of Chiloé. However, I would not be surprised if it predates the Conquest, from Martín Ruiz de Gamboa and Ercilla’s Araucana . . . The myths of the fantastic island listened to [the conquistador’s] wishes and began a construction that rose above the channel and the centuries to come to become a legend. But God, envious of such a magnificent work, each time fulminates it and crumbles it forever in the memory of humanity.

In this story, transcendence annihilates immanence—as foreseen in the Indigenous myth of origin. However, the conflicts condensed in the different stories about the bridge’s project are not easily resolved. They have existed for 60 years and intensified in the last three decades. The mythical infrastructuring process depends on the reproduction of these controversial stories. To that extent, unlike other sociotechnical controversies in which actors construct a definition of a shared world for everyone to find a place (Callon et al. 2009), in this case it seems that there is no possible resolution in sight, no final harmonization of myths. The only alternative is to unfold the infrastructuring process by adding new layers to the conflicting stories.
Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Chacao Bridge on Chiloé Island in southern Chile, work as mythical infrastructuring processes through layers of controversial stories condensed around the form of myths. They shape the territorial spaces and temporalities where infrastructures are called into being but do not yet exist. We consider four relevant conclusions from our analyses.

First, the particularity of our case study covers three main components: an insular territory with a complex hybrid belief system; a historically, politically, and technically significant large infrastructure project around which different disputes arise; and an extensive collection of stories with performative capacities that express the controversial nature of the infrastructure project. Stories are crucial for experiencing the bridge project as an infrastructuring process of nature and culture. Through the form of myths (origin, progress, excellence) that condense the difference between transcendence (belief system, values, meaning) and immanence (natural world, politics, technique) in different conflicting ways, the project of the bridge develops its infrastructuring process.

Second, for Chiloé inhabitants, the bridge project enacts tensions that confront their sense of islandness with national and transnational actors’ political and economic interests. These tensions, however, create new impulses for the reproduction of the island’s cultural life and the reinforcement of political acts of resistance through the appropriation of new forms of global intervention. The fact that the project of the bridge motivates the reedition of the Indigenous myth of origin becomes an opportunity (though reactive) for actualizing memory and resisting, or at least dealing with, the social and cultural changes in the name of progress and technical efficiency.

Third, mythical infrastructuring processes such as those involved in the Chacao Bridge must permanently overcome their improbability. They are improbable because they have to endure in time without having physical existence, namely, as memories of a possible future. At the same time, what makes it possible to overcome their improbability is the controversial nature of this memory of the future because controversies are the ultimate source of motivation for actors to promote, resist, or reappropriate the idea of the bridge. Mythical infrastructuring processes are thus self-reproductive entities: they overcome their improbability by reproducing it.

Finally, while technical problems can have technical resolutions and mythical dilemmas have symbolic ones, the complexity involved
in mythical infrastructuring processes cannot be solved technically or symbolically. The Chacao Bridge thus lets us conceptualize a contradictory state of incompleteness. The infrastructure itself is a site for the reenactment of the frictions between natural, technical, and cultural forces; therefore, it is permanently *under construction*, narratively and materially. As the stories surrounding the bridge’s unfinished condition keep recurring and growing—in a context of socioecological frictions and environmental exposure—they become infrastructuring forces of the temporal and spatial boundaries that define the island’s life form. In this context, the heuristic power of the concept of mythical infrastructuring lies precisely in grasping this contradictory state of suspension in which its material absence is filled with a plurality of stories that render cult to its nonmaterial but infrastructuring presence.

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