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## Decolonising Mourning: World-Making with the Selk'nam People of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses death, mourning and decolonisation, focusing on the Selk'nam of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego, Chile. Methodologically, it is grounded in feminist experiments of bringing creative and personalised writing into an academic scholarship to challenge subject/object-relations, and to generate platforms for affective, world-making intra-actions and undoings of power. Through collaborative efforts of three differently situated co-authors, using poetic epistolary forms of address, the article unfolds an indigenous centred, feminist, decolonial methodology. Along similar lines, the theoretical approach to death and mourning is pluriversal, transgressing Western epistemologies and ontologies. Through letters, addressed to dead and alive, human and non-human key actors in a revitalising of Selk'nam culture, the article questions ethico-politically in/appropriate ways of mourning the consequences of the necropolitics imposed on the Selk'nam through white colonisation, Western modernity and its colonial matrix of necropower. It is critically addressed how mourning the lost became embedded in colonial discourses of white melancholia and humanism. Moreover combining creative writing methodologies, inspired by feminism, posthumanism, and by indigenous activism and practices of reviving Selk'nam culture, the authors use their different locations to search affirmatively for ways of mourning, which open horizons towards decolonising, cultural revitalising, reclaiming of indigenous rights and philosophies of death and mourning.

### KEYWORDS

Selk'nam culture; Karokynka; decolonisation of mourning; white melancholia; indigenous centred feminist decolonial methodology; intra-action with the dead; indigenous philosophy

This article discusses death and mourning within a framework of decolonisation of 'arrogant death' (Lehman 1997), the necropolitics imposed on indigenous people worldwide as part of white colonisation, extractive capitalism, Western modernity and its colonial matrix of necropower (Mbembe 2003; Mignolo 2011). The key focus is the ethico-political question of in/appropriate ways of mourning 'arrogant death'. Considering the layers of loss, generated when death through colonisation (genocide, dispossession, deportation) became 'life's quiet companion' for indigenous people (Lehman 1997), we

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critically address how mourning the lost became embedded in powerful, colonial discourses of white melancholia, intertwined with modern Western humanism. Moreover, we search affirmatively for ways of mourning, which, embedded in indigenous philosophies, open horizons towards decolonising, cultural revitalising, reclaiming of indigenous rights and philosophies, and commitments to world-making practices, emerging as ‘undercurrents’ to post/colonial capitalism (Gómez-Barris 2018). Our search for different approaches to death and mourning is guided by efforts to unfold an indigenous centred, feminist and posthuman, decolonial methodology. This search is put into practice in conversation with the work of decolonial feminist scholarship, arguing for approaches, based on transgressions of boundaries between theoretical, poetic/artistic, corpo- and geopolitically grounded knowledge production and analysis (Anzaldúa 1987, 2015; Perez 1999; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012; Gómez-Barris 2017, 2018; Marambio and Vicuña 2019).

More precisely, we approach the issue of decolonising death and mourning from three corpo- and geopolitically differently situated positions, establishing a feminist and indigenous centred solidarity between them through creative, personalised writing. *Hema’ny* is a Selk’nam woman, indigenous activist, scholar and writer of the Selk’nam people of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego,<sup>1</sup> member of the indigenous, Selk’nam community, Covadonga Ona, and presiding over the organisation Corporación Selk’nam Chile,<sup>2</sup> an organisation claiming indigenous rights from the Chilean state. Descending from her Selk’nam grandfather and great grandmother, Hema’ny is part of a movement for political rights and for revitalising Selk’nam culture and language. *Camila* is a Chilean curator, artist and scholar, a white privileged mestiza who honours her indigenous descent. For almost 10 years, Camila has dedicated her research, artistic work and curatorial practices to Karokynka – the island’s human geography and ecology – through the nomadic research programme *Ensayos*. *Nina* is a feminist professor, who as a white, European scholar, cannot opt-out of her structural entanglement in post/colonial power, even though she would like to. Since her lesbian life partner’s death, she has searched for spiritual-material ways of mourning beyond the predominant Christian and secular scientific outlooks of Western modernity.

Until meeting Hema’ny in January 2019, Camila and Nina operated on the official myth that the Selk’nam had become extinct due to twentieth-century colonial violence. The myth of Selk’nam ‘extinction’ is part of official Chilean history. It was reinforced by two anthropologists, doing fieldwork among the Selk’nam: Austrian priest Martin Gusinde (1886–1969), and North American-French scholar Anne Chapman (1922–2010). Gusinde and Chapman contributed to the construction of the Selk’nam people, culture and language as becoming extinct, basing their scholarly writings on their discipline, classic anthropology’s conceptualisation of cultural ‘purity’. This concept did not take *mestizaje*, living in the borderlands between indigenous cultures and Western modernity (Anzaldúa 1987), into account as a position from which ancient cultures survive, can be taken further and flourish in new forms.

The article aims to search for respectful, solidaric decolonial, feminist and posthuman ways to mourn, remember and be in touch with Selk’nam culture and philosophy today, and protest against the colonial violence and necropower, which transformed the Selk’nam people into disposable, ungrievable bodies (Mbembe 2003; Butler 2004), and changed Karokynka into a resource for extractive capitalism (Gómez-Barris 2018;

Marambio 2019). Furthermore, the aim is to critically address the coloniality of mourning and white melancholia, to which modern humanists such as Gusinde and Chapman induce us. They reinstall dead Selk'nam bodies as grievable, but on terms which lock the Selk'nam into a memorial space where they together with Karokynka as naturalcultural spirit-matter (Anzaldúa 2015), and embodiment of ancestral knowledge, can only be mourned as relics of the past, while denied access to futurity (Lehman 1997). We want to find ways to mourn differently, i.e. to critically decolonise mourning through efforts to unlock the confining of the Selk'nam, the spirit-matter of Karokynka, and their mutual entanglement to the past, affirmatively reclaiming their rights to futurity, supported by new amorous coalitions.

The method is personal letters to dead and living, human and non-human key actors, significant for the process of mourning the past, and for reclaiming Selk'nam futurity. A letter from Camila to Karokynka situates the island's spellbinding ways of summoning to action. Hema'ny addresses a letter to the people 'carrying a Chilean identity card', calling them to act upon the fact that the Selk'nam are not extinct and have a right to exist. Nina addresses the anthropologists, whose research co-constructed the myth of Selk'nam 'extinction'. As a lively Selk'nam presence in the here-and-now, and an embodied promise of futurity, Hema'ny addresses her 3-year-old grandson K'tel who is learning to speak both Selk'nam language and Spanish in a family supported process of unfolding new sovereignty. To unlock the past, and make K'tel's Selk'nam lineage visible, Hema'ny also calls forward her great grandmother, whose child, Hema'ny's grandfather, was stolen and enslaved by the colonisers. Camila and Nina, too, summon the dead, addressing two Selk'nam women, who, through Chapman's research, were made into icons of a 'world [that] had disappeared forever' (Chapman 1988, 1): the shaman Lola Kiep'ja, recorded by Chapman in 1965–1966, and Ángela Loij, who acted as translator and informant for Chapman after Kiep'ja's death. We are profoundly indebted to both women, when it comes to knowledge of Selk'nam culture and cosmology.

We chose the epistolary form to reach out to these actors in other ways than just representing them in third-person writing. Through the personal 'you' address we seek to evoke affective relations and create personal encounters, calling for joint actions towards change, grounded in a relational, decolonising ethics. In conversation with decolonial feminisms, the approach is also inspired by feminist experiments of bringing creative and personalised writing into academic scholarship in order to generate platforms for affective, world-making, ethico-political practices and undoings of power (Lykke 2010, 2014). The seven letters making up the article have emerged out of shared creative writing prompts.

### From Camila to Karokynka<sup>3</sup>

Dear Karokynka,

I realise the most common reasons for people arriving to your shores since the sixteenth century onwards have been conquest, escape and the lure of adventure. It was probably the latter that brought me to your side. But in hindsight I wonder if the most powerful motive for us all is the need to sense we *belong* on the earth. Would you agree that earthly *belongingness* is the leading cause of attraction to your distant topography?

Distant from what you ask? I smile, and think that in claiming to have found my place on your rugged back you are not distant from anywhere significant, instead everywhere else is

far away from you, from home. Though to call you home seems a stretch. You are marked by the vestiges of colonial efforts to claim you, by different waves of missionaries, settlers, and migrants drawn to make a life within your confines, though, eventually abandoning their enterprises. No one seems to be able to claim they are 'of' Tierra del Fuego; is this because those indigenous to you have been made to disappear and denied their sovereignty?

Thousands of years prior to your colonial christening you were known as Karokynka. Tierra del Fuego is a recent name for you. Ferdinand Magellan, upon sighting you, identified smoke arising from your insides; when his description of your contours arrived at the ears of the Spanish king, Carlos I, it is said the king inferred that if there was smoke, there was fire. So he called you Land of Fire, Tierra del Fuego (Chatwin 1988, 144). It's an evocative name.

Yet, Carlos Gallardo, who studied Selk'nam culture in the early twentieth century, wrote that 'Selk'nam named their land Karokynka by fusing together the particulars kar (extreme/very), huhin (earth/territory) and ka (ours/mine)' (Gallardo 1910, 98). Karokynka is not merely a toponym. It is an original word that unfurls your human geography.

I was attracted to you even before I laid eyes on you. I'm not sure if it was the ring of the words Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego/Land of Fire, the ensuing image of territory ablaze or, the story of the Portuguese explorer who, aiming to circumnavigate the world, 'discovered' that there was a piece of it that had broken off, allowing him to sail from one ocean (or Western understanding of the planet) to another. Though I'm sure my familial ties with Chile, the nation state that claims a part of you today, fuelled my initial passion for you, it is your eccentricity that charms me now. I mean this literally: you are peripheral to the whole of a continent, you are half-Chilean/half-Argentinean, you are part of a group of many islands. In this, your singularity deviates from established notions of individuality, giving way instead to the revelatory potential of finding/losing one's self in the hybrid multiplicity of an archipelago.

I remember the first time I sat across from you, December 2009, facing the Strait of Magellan, wondering how to begin to experience you. Once I got off the ferry, the wide-open space of your Northern territory engulfed me. The pull of your curvature is distinct. It's as if one doesn't even need to press the gas pedal: the slight inclination of the planet draws the vehicle forward. The sun broke the clouds and the wind quickly turned the day from gloomy to bright to dark again in a matter of hours. At least I think it was hours, but I lost track of time; space expanded around me and I distinctly recall feeling that I was no longer me. I was out there running alongside the guanacos.<sup>4</sup>

You exude a sense of continuity, of entropic stability in the face of the changing tides that surprises me and supersedes my capacity to understand your relationship to deep time and the future. Your resilience, expressed in the appearance of millennial lichens, wayward penguins, and ghostly glaciers, reminds me that you've withstood countless forces of change. Seeing the arrival of Fitzroy and Darwin aboard the HMS Beagle in 1833, did you sense the inevitable transformations to come? The influenza and pistols that decimated your indigenous Selk'nam, Yámana, Káweskar and Haush peoples; the mining machinery that, still today, reaps your minerals; the bibles and other books that changed the language uttered in your regions; the military apparatus that divided you into this or that nation.

Karokynka, I am attempting to address you whole in this letter – to reveal to you what I think you already know, but that I feel I must state. I have dedicated my vocation to you,

and I curate for you by cultivating a likeness of you. This may sound odd but in 2011, I became ill with cancer. Faced with the arduous task of understanding what it meant to have radical cells differentiating themselves from the rest of 'me', I thought of you. Through meditation I pictured my body as an archipelago composed of many solid bits floating in water, porous and susceptible to the atmosphere. I thought of how you have survived so many 'radical' invasions, and strove to imagine how you survived. I dissolved my sense of self and forged a more expansive image of me. To do this I had to teach myself to die. You have died countless times. Over the millennia you've seen the world end again and again. I believe this experience has given you infinite ecological wisdom, which you impart to me and others inquiring into your human geography. Your stories illuminate, for us, the potential unfolding of a model of contemporary cohabitation: one that does not deny difference, that holds space for remediation to emerge, that stores memory, and that rewinds the superficial divides between species and things, nature and culture, native and non-native, language and land, and life and death.

I end this address to you by recognising that given the physical distance and difference between you and me I don't imagine you feel the way I do or hear what I hear, but I know, from experience, that when I set foot on you I touched a presence. I felt observed, heard, caressed; sometimes even slapped. You defy me. What I mean by this is that 'I' dissolve in your gaze, I disappear in your breath, I re-materialize in your bitter cold; I know myself through you, in you and of you.

Karokynka, you and I may not speak the same language, but I hear/feel you, and risk to make myself vulnerable in the name of transgressing the norms that deny your livelihood and that of your original inhabitants, and to contest the governments that sell you off, the individuals that fence you in, and the peoples that refuse to care for you and have historically not seen your worth, or even 'seen' you at all.

Camila

## From Hema'ny to the Chilean State

To the State of Chile.

How to start a dialogue with the state if it is not in front of you, if it does not have a proper face, if it is a multitudinous entity, an idea, an ephemeral notion of homeland, a space inhabited by people who identify with a single flag.

State, how easy it is to enunciate the word, to name you and yet how difficult it is for me to talk to you, maybe I should close my eyes or talk to you while looking at the stars on a lonely night, to tell you that I feel hurt. Ignorance is a valuable weapon for any state. And to call us extinct is convenient for many, but I would like to tell you that extinction itself does not apply when there is no evidence. There has never been a reliable investigation carried out in good faith to determine what really happened in Tierra del Fuego.

How to speak to a state, what or who is the state of Chile? Should I address myself to the politicians who create the laws for the state, to the judiciary that is supposed to protect and enforce these laws generated by the political class? Maybe I should address the armed forces and police corps that we are made to believe exist to protect the people of Chile and the sovereignty of the state.

Or perhaps it would be better for me to address myself to the researchers, writers and academics who have determined the fate and participation of the Selk'nam in history. Maybe a conversation with them would be enough to channel the information, to transmit it to all in a transversal way.

It is utopian to think so naively.

I prefer to address this letter to anyone who voluntarily or not, is carrying a Chilean identity card.

My name is Hema'ny, I was born in the city of Valdivia, and I grew up knowing that my maternal grandfather was taken from his native lands and sold as a servant to the family of my maternal grandmother. A story worthy of a soap opera, one in which the young servant boy steals the heart of the mistress of the house and takes her away with him; but that story had nuances and details that I did not come to fully understand until I became an adult. My grandfather, like many other children were stolen from their families and taken off of Tierra del Fuego at the end of the nineteenth century. The Selk'nam people, who lived for thousands of years on that island were violently removed from the territory so that the colonists could take sovereignty over it, in the name of the state and progress.

Treated like animals, the *tolderías* (ancient ways of life) were violated, Selk'nam men were murdered, Selk'nam women raped and massacred, some Selk'nam children were 'lucky' enough to be taken to the homes of the well to do in Porvenir or Punta Arenas to be 'educated or civilised' into serving as domestic labourers, the less fortunate were exploited in the sex trade.

Some adolescents were handed over to the militia, sold onto passing ships as cheap workhands or to mining companies, some were sent north to work in the nitrate mines. This is how my people survived and went unnoticed.

The state claims that we are extinct, the state has not recognised the genocide, the state looks at us impassively, negated a whole history of suffering, we have not even been able to mourn.

Today the Selk'nam people are scattered all along this state called Chile, but we are conscious of existing and anxious to meet, to look at each other, to face the past and to mourn our dead, but how can one mourn a dead person one did not know? How do you mourn those who are unrecognised as dead?

How difficult it is to speak to a state when you cannot look it in the face, all I can do is sigh in pain, swallow the hard words I want to say, and write. I write to tell you that I dream, since I was a child, I dream of the face of my history. I look for my people's history and it tires me beyond words that I cannot find my way to the truth, that I can't hold history in my hands and show it to the stars and say: 'Grandfather I found your mother, I cried, I buried her ... now you can rest because I fulfilled my promise, that one I made to you on your deathbed, when I kissed your forehead. You were never *huacho*, you were not an orphan, you had parents who loved you but who lived in a moment of history in which an entity called the state wanted to enlarge itself and, in its growth, there were people who lost their right to exist.'

How to speak to the state and explain to it that the dignity of any human being lies primarily in their right to exist.

El pueblo selk'nam sigue existiendo. The Selk'nam people exist. I exist.

Hema'ny Molina Vargas, Presidente  
Corporación Selk'nam Chile, Comunidad indígena COVADONGA ONA

## From Nina to anthropologists Martin Gusinde and Anne Chapman

Dear Martin, Dear Anne.

Martin, I have studied your monumental 1200 page long monograph on the Selk'nam people and culture, and the around 900 photos (Palma 2004, 15) from your fieldwork in Tierra del Fuego/Karokynka, 1919–1923 (Gusinde 1931). Anne, I have also read your studies of the Selk'nam (Chapman 1982), building on Martin's work, and on your own fieldwork in Tierra del Fuego/Karokynka in the 1960s/1970s. I have studied your two coffee table books with Martin's pictures (Chapman 2002a, 2002b), and I have listened to the 92 recordings, which you, in 1965–1966, did of 90 year old Selk'nam shaman Kiepja's chants shortly before she died in 1966 (2007). Finally, I have seen your documentary film on the Selk'nam (Chapman and de Gonzalés 1977).

I note how you both, from a humanist perspective, mourn Selk'nam deaths and protest against the white colonisers' massacres, destruction, deportation and dispossession (see, Gusinde 1931, 69; Chapman and de Gonzalés 1977, minute 00.50.50). However, seen from a critical decolonial and queer perspective, I cannot ignore how your approaches, despite your outrage, reflect classic anthropology's commitment to the white gaze, complicit with the colonising power, from which you tried to distance yourself, evoking humanist protest. You both partook in the scholarly power game of representing 'Anthropos' (non-Western people) from the viewpoint of 'Civilised Humanity', i.e. white Western modernity, claiming epistemic superiority (Osamu 2006). Both of you also claimed the anthropologist's 'indisputable' scholarly right to publish collected materials. You, Anne, did this, even though Kiep'ja articulated hesitation about who should and should not be allowed to listen to the recordings of her songs (Chapman 1988, 4–5), and articulated her scepticism vis-à-vis potential audiences in the phrase "No es para los civilizados", meaning Whites should not see them' (Chapman 1988, 6), when shown Gusinde's Hain/Kloketen photos.<sup>5</sup>

Still, I trust you both, when you write that you wanted to befriend your Selk'nam informants (Gusinde 1931, 88; Chapman 1982, 3–5), and that these friendships meant a lot to you. Martin, your book also tells me how your queer, although very white desires, awakened by your encounters with Selk'nam people during the fieldwork, made you feel more at home among them than in white communities (Gusinde 1931, 66ff). Your wish to be adopted, initiated as a Kloketen, and, in the tradition of Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (2000), to become 'the last Selk'nam' (Palma 2004, 38; Tuck and Wayne Yang 2012, 13–17) vibrates in-between the lines of your scholarly account. Similarly, white desires to become-indigenous seem also to nourish your feelings of happiness, Anne, when you tell how Kiep'ja called you 'her daughter' (Chapman 1988, 2).

But I also note the layers of pragmatism and extraction. What a boost for your careers that you got access to such a rich ethnographic material through your Selk'nam informants! Your scholarly efforts appear to be messy entanglements of extraction, career-boosting, friendship, white queer desires for becoming-other, becoming-indigenous, and white humanist efforts to counteract extinction, giving the complex Selk'nam spirituality, cosmology and culture, a monumental posthumous life through your scholarly work.



I write this letter to urge you to posthumously recognise your immersion in the colonial power relations you protested against. You, Martin, were commissioned by the Chilean state, which with one hand dispossessed the Selk'nam, letting white sheep farmers enclose their land as private property, and with the other supported you in setting a monument of dying Selk'nam culture so that 'Civilised Humanity' could memorise its own 'glorious' evolution from 'Child' to 'Maturity'. You, Anne were commissioned by the famous, French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Centre National de Recherche in Paris, to record the chants of the 'last Selk'nam shaman', so you dutifully brought your recordings of Kiep'ja's chants to Paris, and published them on CD (Chapman 2007).

No doubt you both saw yourself as Humanist Saviours, saving Selk'nam culture as relic of a 'stone age hunting culture' (Chapman and de Gonzalés 1977, minute 00.00.49). But as noted by decolonial theory (Mignolo 2011, xxiv), Modernity of Salvation is linked with its darker twin, Modernity of Colonisation. You both and I, as a white queerfeminist scholar from a different generation, must learn to recognise our structural implicatedness. Therefore, I shall urge you, posthumously, to critically reflect on the ways in which your discipline's celebration of 'pure savagedom', and your contribution to declaring Selk'nam culture on the route to extinction, while ignoring the borderlands of *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa 1987), have posed obstacles for Hema'ny and her contemporary Selk'nam community, Covadonga Ona, when reclaiming indigenous rights from the Chilean state (Di Girolamo 2018).

Nina

### From Hema'ny to her eldest grandson Ketel or K'tel

My Beloved Ketel or K'tel. The One Who Comes From the Stars.

You are still so little that some time will have to transpire before you understand the meaning of this letter. You are small now and yet your legacy is so great that I do not know how to begin to summarise the history of your lineage. I can tell you of your hóowen (ancestors), of the snowy forests of Karokynka (Tierra del Fuego), of the tary (body painting) that your ancestors carried on their bodies ... but I feel that even without me explaining it to you, without anybody telling you, without ever having seen any of it for yourself, you'll know what I'm talking about.

You announced yourself before I even knew you were coming into this world. Your strength hit one day, right in the center of my heart, and I knew then that like a renewed promise you would come from the stars.

This promise is what mobilises the energies of the universe and what assures me that you'll grow, healthy and strong, and someday be ready to face your story. When this happens, you will be free to take this story face on or, if you so wish, to let it pass as if it were water in your hands.

I know it will not be an easy decision. It is never easy to take life's challenges face to face, but Selk'nam blood runs through your veins, noble and brave blood. You'll be able to look at the past without fear because we've built a road for you, we've laid bridges so that you can cross the dark pits of pain without falling into them. There will only be paved trails for you, and if you so choose you can

finish clearing these so that those who follow in your footsteps can walk without stumbling.

When you do understand the meaning of this letter, I may not be here to accompany you, or maybe I will, I do not know this, but what I do know for sure is that you will have the whole story. You know your past and it will support you, so you can move forward if you decide.

Losing loved ones is always painful, but losing oneself is indescribable. This is how we walked, for a long time. We wandered alone and were lost in the midst of discrimination, knowing we were heirs of a millenary culture, but without any way to claim it and without anyone who wanted to listen to its teachings. This reality has already changed that, we are here, we are being heard but still we are missing our ancestors ... we need to look back and find the vestiges of the puzzle, so that we can weep and allow for those tears to cleanse the soul. We will mourn the pain that has accumulated for generations, we will transform fear into fortitude, and slowly confidence in our culture will return.

The glorious day when you walk along the path your great grandfather tread, fulfilling his dream of returning home, will be significantly symbolic and I hope to be there walking by your side, K'tel. If time passes too quickly and when that moment arrives, and I am no longer able to travel back to Karokynka, I want you to know that if you decide to walk with your people, I will be there, next to you, counting the steps from the stars. I will be awaiting you in the forest, or in the pampas, or maybe in the stream and I will wink at you when you pass, and if you listen to the telel (owl) maybe it'll be me who is greeting you.

The akel that you'll cover your skin with will be a symbol of hope for you and all your generation, you'll carry an inherited treasure in your heart, the spirits will be there to host you and to see your generation grow and I'll sing by your side while the tary dries, I will sing your name while the ancestors rest, finally knowing that their children are home.

And if you decide to walk in another direction, to take another path, far from Karokynka, you must know that nothing changes, wherever your steps guide you, there, all your ancestors will walk beside you, to watch over your sleep and protect your soul. You will always have the strength of your Selk'nam blood, the pride of your story, we survived K'tel, we are, we are here, and though sometimes many do not understand it, we have learned that being here is enough.

Your Grandmother

### **From Hema'ny to her Selk'nam great grandmother**

Dear Great Grandmother

I do not know what to call you, Great Mother, I do not know what your name was or what your face looked like; when I imagine it, I can only see pain.

I heard very brief stories about you when, in rare, short and evasive sentences, my grandfather mentioned you. He was never clear and I never dared to ask more; out of fear; I was afraid to learn the tragic details of how you left the earth.

My heart aches when I think about the hard times you lived through.

I have four children, your great-great-grandchildren. Beautiful, cheerful and strong, they fill my life and are a source of energy for me. When I think of what it would be like to live a day without knowing about them and their whereabouts, I feel that my life loses meaning.

I imagine what your life must have been like before you and my grandfather were captured, before he was stolen from you, I imagine you and he lived happily in your harowen, with the rest of your family, your asska, until suddenly your life changed. You were persecuted without understanding all the reasons, without knowing of greed or of the drive to amass belongings.

'Civilisation' arrived to Tierra del Fuego without mercy, no respect was paid to those who had been living there for thousands of years. You, among them, were one of the women wearing skins, and straight oiled hair. I imagine your dark eyes and a wide and innocent smile across your face. I imagine so many things, I imagine you in so many ways.

I remember my grandfather's daily habits: his inability to treasure material goods, his indifference to power commonly exercised by people, and his profound simplicity – which appeared as almost offensive to those who surrounded him. He seemed to settle for plain good food and a place to rest, spending long hours sitting under the trees in the plaza looking out at the horizon, looking at nothing. When I managed to tease his memory, his words were short and harsh, almost without feeling. Absent.

Great Grandmother, do you know I have sat in front of you hundreds of times, by the heat of the campfire, I have seen your face in the darkness and I have never seen your tears; I know they are there, hidden in your heart waiting for the day when they can flow as the stream flows, slow and timid at first, gaining force along the way, until, eventually, your tears will turn into a violent cascade. This is how I imagine your pain, and I would like for you to be able to cry.

If you could see the strength that your memory awakens in your descendants! I feel your force transmitted to me just through thinking about our history.

It is not History with a capital H, but our story that shakes the earth under my feet. When I think of how you had your child snatched from your arms, I see how you fought, shouted, cried. I imagine you implored for mercy and asked that those disrespecting you, disguised as superiors, see how you were no wild animal, how you were capable of raising your own child. They with their civilisation and their creeds, only brought pain to a land that was abundant with love. They, who only knew of profits and belongings – what strange customs, right? – clung to their guns, animals and fought for pieces of land. They who thought they were superior when fighting for that miserable smallness, could not conceive that Tierra (del Fuego) belonged to everyone, that it fed everyone and that the animals there were free so that everyone could hunt when they had to eat.

You paid with your own body the price of their ignorance. Your son became a survivor, far from your arms, far from the Tierra that saw him born and far from your teachings, he was alone, and he could not be the best version of you, but after all he survived, lead his life, in silence, remembering you, longing for you.

Today I would like to offer you my tears so that you can mourn your pain but also so that you can cry of joy because, Great Grandmother your son, your grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren, we still remember you and we are still standing.

Hema'ny

## From Nina to Selk'nam shaman Lola Kiep'ja

Dear Kiep'ja.

Your spectral voice, mediated by the recordings which Chapman, made with you shortly before you died, touches me profoundly. Your voice is energetic, deep and powerful. It is amazing that your voice was still so strong even though you were 90 years old, when the recordings were made. Sometimes you laugh, as if, for your inner eye, you imagine funny and joyful events, like hauling a whale ashore. Through your chants and songs, recorded, translated and interpreted to Chapman by your younger Selk'nam friend Loij, I also know your shaman song about going to the realm of the dead:

Here I am singing,

the wind is carrying me.

I am following the footsteps of those departed.

I am allowed to come to the Mountain of Power.

I have arrived at the Great Mountainrange of the Sky.

The power of those who departed returns to me.

Those of infinity have spoken to me.

(Kiep'ja, in Chapman and de Gonzalés 1977, reprinted with permission from Hema'ny Molina Vargas).

Listening to your songs, Kiep'ja, makes me want to follow your lead. You are now yourself among 'those departed', and I would like to meet you there. But how to access the world of the dead? Will I be able to find you, Kiep'ja? Can I learn some of the skills and insights, you possessed? Can I learn to go to the mountain of power, and make those of infinity speak to me? I don't know, but while listening, I feel an urge to tell you that I find so much resonance in your words. I am mourning my beloved life partner who died from cancer some years ago, and since then, I have worked hard to critically-affirmatively search for different ways of mourning and reconnecting than those predominant in my culture, Western modernity. I try to engage in processes of spiritually-materially co-becoming with my dead beloved in her present state as ashes mixed with algae sand at the bottom of the sea, and I so much want to learn from your insights in spirit-matter, Kiep'ja.

My background for searching for alternative entrance points to death and mourning is that I find Western modernity's approaches to these issues very unhelpful. You expressed scepticism vis-à-vis Western modernity, the culture of 'los civilizados' (Chapman 1988, 6). I share this scepticism, due to the colonial matrix of power (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012) on which Western modernity is built. More specifically, I see the knowledge claims regarding death, articulated by two powerful institutions within this matrix, Christianity and Science, as problematic. Christianity urges me to think about death along the lines of an immortal soul, detached from material bodies and material remains; this way of thinking is so much carried by contempt for flesh and matter, and by beliefs in the superiority and exceptionalism of 'Civilised Humanity' (Osamu 2006). Many of those people in my culture, who claim to think beyond religion and to be guided by Science and secular

thought in their approach to the life/death-threshold, are also deeply embedded in ways of thinking which, like the Christian ones, separate mind and body, spirit and matter. These people tell me that the dead body is just a piece of scrap, when the 'I' is extinguished with the last exhalation. So in the end, the story of death of these people, too, boils down to a contempt for body and matter and to a belief in human superiority, comparable to the Christian one. Once more, the dead body is just seen as a piece of base matter, while the valuable thing is the human 'I', now passed away.

I find it urgent to learn to think differently about death, and the words of your song touch me deeply, opening so very different philosophical horizons. I want to learn more about this, but I take the point, if you do not feel inclined to discuss with me – due to the fact that I, whether I like it or not, belong to 'los civilizados', and cannot just shed my privileged white academic background as a used snake skin. But neither do I want to continue practicing the white humanist melancholia of my colleagues, Gusinde and Chapman, who nostalgically mourned the demise of your culture, while confirming its extinction by locking you, your culture and kin up in the past. Nor do I wish to practice cultural appropriation, superficially claiming your wisdom as a convenient addition to Western world views instead of seriously questioning the latter.

So, Kiep'ja, is it ok to use your spectral chanting to guide me towards 'learning to unlearn' and relearn, as decolonial thinkers (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012) suggest as a careful and respectful approach to indigenous philosophies, and to ways of mourning which mean learning from those who departed before us as you teach us to do in your chant?

Nina

### From Camila to Selk'nam woman Ángela Loij

Dear Loij,

¿Será muy contradictorio si te escribo esta carta en inglés? I suppose it is, but I'll sustain the contradiction because it leads to the crux of the questions of translation, lostness and truth-speak that you embody.

I know from a statement made by your Selk'nam neighbour, Garibaldi Honte, that you wandered a lot around on Karokynka (Baldassarre 2007, 127). I too like to roam Karokynka on foot, as your people have done for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the White Man, prior to the fences that were put up to create the sheep ranch that you were born on, prior to the construction of the Christian missions that incarcerated you. I look at a photo of you, taken in 1912 (Chapman 2002b, 91) and wonder: what language do you dream in?

Eleven years later, in 1923, another photo was taken of you by Gusinde (Chapman 2002b, 42). I think you may have seen it, because there exists a version of it accompanied by a caption that reads: 'at her request, this photo was retouched to remove her face paint, which was only applied for the photographer's sake.' (Chapman 1982, 148) You are not identified by name here, but in another of Gusinde's images of the Kloketen/Hain ceremony, I read your hybrid Spanish Selk'nam name, Ángela Loij. Your sisters don't carry Spanish names. Was it at the mission that you received the name that I call you by?

I doubt every piece of ethnographic evidence there is about you. Attempting to engage with the palimpsestic<sup>6</sup> excess inherent in these images, I realise I am only further

fictionalising you. Does it make a difference? Does it matter to you? Why does it matter to me? Why do you mean so much to me?

I rewatch scenes from Chapman's anthropological documentary (Chapman and de Gonzalés 1977), where found footage from your first visit to Buenos Aires in 1969 is introduced. Watching this, I get lost, trying to make sense of Chapman's motives, and I wish I could ask you if you understood her? Why did she omit writing about your descendants, but include a photo of you with your grandniece on her website? Such a disquieting relationship. Loij, I'd so like to hear your voice but how does one listen to the dead?

The final image of the film is Kiepja's face over which scrolls a translation of her Death Chant (see letter to Kiep'ja, this article) I've listened to this chant so many times, and all of a sudden, I am struck by the thought that the first translation is yours!!!!

I read it, striving to hear you, your story, the story of the translator.

As a translator myself, I know that word-for-word accounts don't render a culture meaningful. I know that the subtle art of translation is a transcoding device (Sandoval 2000, 166), a technology that transforms the fundamental precepts of one culture into comprehensible categories of another. This means that much of what I know about Selk'nam culture I know thanks to the translation services you provided for Chapman.

It is some version of your story that I hear murmured under the breath of the ethnographers who ride on the back of your skill. I now see/hear you detecting Chapman's interest, redirecting her reflections, prompting her comprehension, provoking her confusion. You are the ultimate trickster, wise woman. Maybe your translator's transversality is the reason why your beautiful face never became the cover of one of Chapman's books, why you were never made a central character, despite Chapman's acknowledgment of how, during the years when she knew you, you 'told her about the world before death existed, when the hoowin people of primeval times inhabited the earth', and you recited myths to her that explained 'why humans exist' (Chapman 2003).

As I struggle to grasp the meaning of my own existence, you, Loij, are my role model. The story of your endurance are the makings of a decolonial thread, a tail ending for me to tug on. Thank you from those of us who translate for a living, not by choice, but because we are born into it. We who procure to be 'as precise' as is needed, but who also practice cadence, let things fall. We cannot sustain it all and become brokers of what is lost. We exist in the sheer impossibility of equating opposites, knowing that accuracy is relative. The distance between what I read that Chapman says that you said that Kiep'ja said is the gap that I inhabit. This distance is a measure of intimacy; affinity through difference.

Camila

### **'The Power of Those Who Departed Returns to Me': An Open-Ended Conclusion**

When we discussed this conclusion, Hema'ny said: 'But how can we conclude, when we have just begun?' Instead of producing closure, we want to open new horizons with our letter writing. The epistolary form was inspired by feminist ways of using creative writing as method of inquiry (Lykke 2010, 2014; Marambio 2019), and by calls in decolonial feminist scholarship for a focus on embodied poetic/artistic practices as a pathway to affirmative articulations of 'submerged' perspectives (Gómez-Barris 2017, 1). Working

from these inspirations, we wanted to make an indigenous centred feminist decolonial methodology emerge, appropriate for decolonising the mourning of the losses, which colonisation inflicted on Karokynka and the Selk'nam. Our letters were also written as personally committed invitations to engage in mourning practices that transgress the effects of white humanist melancholia and establish a relational ethics apt for unlocking congealed power matrices, and opening towards alternative futurities.

Through our cluster of epistolary addresses, we summoned an assemblage of human and non-human, dead and alive actors. We did this, based on the assumption that processes of decolonial reworlding, and generating of change towards socially and ecologically just, equal, and more caring and enjoyable futures, are based on the actions of many actors, not all of them human and not all of them living. Our letters were addressed to actors whom we think/feel may have key importance for effecting change. When we addressed Karokynka and the dead, we aimed to unhinge them from the positions, in which epistemologies of Western modernity fixate them. There, Karokynka is restricted to appear as silent object of profit extracting capitalist enterprises, while, in modern chrononormative time, the dead addressees are locked into irretrievably silenced or canonised stories of the past. But when we summon Karokynka and the dead with a 'you' address, embedded in a relational, decolonialising ethics, we shift the perspective to an epistemology inspired by Selk'nam and other indigenous philosophies, based on the assumption that land and dead ancestors have the power to affect, re/empower and speak to the living. Rather than accepting the claim to universality of Western epistemologies and ontologies, we question them and opt instead for pluriversality (Mignolo 2011). Writing our letters, we have built on intersecting assumptions, inspired by strands of indigenous, decolonial and posthuman feminist thought, implying that frozen stories can be thawed, and that not only the living, but also the dead and the non-human may be summoned as interlocutors and actors with potentials for effecting change in the here-and-now.

We will end by articulating the article's overall hope for change with an address from Hema'ny, encouraging you, dear readers, to reflect on your role in transgressing the myth of Selk'nam 'extinction' through her call:

'Get to know us! We are here! We exist!'

## Notes

1. Karokynka is the Selk'nam name of the island, today primarily known by the colonisers' name Tierra del Fuego, a big island of the archipelago, south of the Strait of Magellan, divided between Chile and Argentina.
2. Corporación Selk'nam Chile and Covadonga Ona appeared in public in 2018 (Di Girolamo 2018).
3. The letter to Karokynka is an abbreviated version of a chapter in Camila Marambio's unpublished PhD exegesis (Marambio 2019). A full-length version of Marambio's Karokynka address is accepted for publication in a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Third Text*.
4. Guanacos are a wild Andean mammal similar to the domestic llama (*Lama guanicoe*, family *Camelidae*).
5. The Hain or Kloketen ceremony is a key Selk'nam initiation ritual, reflecting the complex Selk'nam cosmology and mythology, described in detail by anthropologists Gusinde and Chapman (Gusinde 1931; Chapman 1982). Gusinde took photos of the ceremony in 1923.
6. According to *English Oxford dictionary* a palimpsest is, 'a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing'.

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**Camila Marambio** holds a PhD in curatorial practice and is the curator of the nomadic collective research program Ensayos. Her PhD thesis, *Distancia: A Measure of Intimacy* includes an unpublished exegesis (MADA 2019) and the first season of the web series, DISTANCIA, co-directed by Marambio and the artist, Carolina Saquel, and is based on collaborations within the framework of Ensayos. The web series premiered in Santiago, Chile, November, 2018; the second season is due out in 2020. Website: <https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/>, <https://www.ladistancia.tv/>

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