



# Ecotourism, infrastructures, and the drama of sovereignty on a border island

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## Funding information

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute: Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Fellowship; William & Mary: Summer Research Award

## Abstract

The Ruta 30 scenic road project in Argentine Tierra del Fuego has encountered significant resistance. In this article, we analyze a public hearing convened to assess the road's impacts as an event illuminating the daily dynamics of the region. In this borderland, narratives about sovereignty create a space of liminalities between pasts and futures, centers and peripheries, and living and the dead. In this context, and with Patagonia's expanding conservation and ecotourism frontiers, studying public reflexivity becomes crucial for understanding rapid changes. To this end, we employ Turner's "social drama" concept to analyze the hearing as a performance enacting authorized discourses of experts, policymakers, environmentalists, industry, and workers. We conclude by discussing "liminal governance" in a border territory that transcends neoliberal and sovereign designs, and "impossible opposition," revealing how the hearing reframed the road conflict as a sovereignty crisis, ultimately mitigating potential disruptions to established settler-colonial structures.

## KEYWORDS

belonging, ecotourism, frontiers, Patagonia, roads

## Resumen

El proyecto de carretera escénica Ruta 30 en Tierra del Fuego argentina ha enfrentado resistencias. En este artículo, analizamos la audiencia pública convocada para evaluar los impactos de la carretera, un evento que arroja luz sobre las dinámicas diarias de una región fronteriza donde las narrativas de soberanía reafirman liminalidades entre pasados y futuros, centros y periferias, y vivos y muertos. Con la expansión de las fronteras de la conservación y el ecoturismo en Patagonia, el estudio de la reflexividad pública es crucial para comprender el entrelazamiento entre dinámicas globales y locales. Por ello, empleamos el concepto de "drama social" de Turner para analizar la audiencia como una representación que pone en escena discursos autorizados de expertos, políticos, ecologistas, empresarios, y trabajadores. Concluimos discutiendo la "governabilidad liminal" en un territorio fronterizo que trasciende los diseños neoliberales y soberanos, y la "oposición imposible", mostrando cómo la audiencia transformó el conflicto de la carretera en una crisis de soberanía, mitigando su potencial para alterar las estructuras coloniales establecidas.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

carreteras, ecoturismo, fronteras, Patagonia, pertenencia

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## INTRODUCTION

The Beagle Canal Coastal Corridor, or *Ruta 30* [route 30], projects a scenic road along the Argentine coastline of Tierra del Fuego's main island. Regarded as Argentina's southernmost roadway, its purpose is to afford visitors access to scientifically curated landmarks featuring unique biological and geological formations entwined with heritage narratives. Concurrently, the plan assembles a hierarchized space, aiming to connect smaller towns to Ushuaia, the capital, and the broader Argentine trade networks. Conceived by the Argentine military in 1991 as the "Atlantic Corridor" and renamed the "Route of the End of the World" by the province in 1995, the project lay dormant until 2018, when an Argentinian company secured the construction contract. Subsequently, public resistance to the road and its impacts grew, leading the government to organize one of the most attended public hearings in Tierra del Fuego.

In this article, we closely examine the 9-h public hearing and its interweaving of a road dispute with an intense exercise of public reflexivity. This exercise revolved around notions of belonging, insularity, and fragmentation in a frontier territory where, despite shifts between colonial, oil, industrial, and green productivist frontiers, many continually find ways to capitalize upon a territory revered as empty and underpopulated, ready to be transformed and occupied. The single-day hearing shed light on broader daily dynamics in Tierra del Fuego, a borderland where narratives of the past and the future are fiercely debated and delineated in pursuit of a unified social and territorial whole to come. Paradoxically, as our analysis reveals, such a productive drive ends up generating a geographical space thriving in liminalities between pasts and futures, centers and peripheries, and the realms of the dead and the living.

Scholarship has documented the emerging injustices and highly asymmetrical conflicts spurred by the expansion of global frontiers in Patagonia, including conservation and ecotourism frontiers (Trentini, 2012; Picone et al., 2022; Beer, 2023; Mendoza et al., 2017). Inspired by this conversation, we find value in employing Turner's (1974) concept of "social drama" to analyze the public hearing—a "public episode of irruption" (1974, 33) centering on sovereignty concerns. The hearing navigated the crisis by formulating a narrative capable of reintegrating new meanings, infrastructures, movements, and ideas into the pursuit of sovereignty. Within the plot of the hearing, proponents of the project highlighted Tierra del Fuego's historical deficiencies in population, development, and recognition. They portrayed *Ruta 30* as a work to rectify deficiencies and injustices. Conversely, critics of the route design harnessed their expertise and historical accounts to shield the territory from potential sovereign threats, narrated in terms of archaeological or environmental impacts. Despite the intense clash between the two positions, none opposed the road construction, each stance affirming the need to assert sovereignty in a border territory under threat.

We undertook discourse analysis complemented by ethnographic and archival research to analyze the public hearing. Mara Dicenta, who currently resides in the United States, had lived in Tierra del Fuego during her dissertation research and attended the hearing with curiosity about the region's politics of expertise and conservation. Ana Cecilia Gerrard had an indirect connection to the event, tied to her collaborative research with reemergent Indigenous communities that, despite not attending the hearing, halted roadworks upon the unearthing of human remains. After sharing a house at the Austral Center for Scientific Research, both authors engaged in collaborations centered around consultation and co-management initiatives in Tierra del Fuego, including the *Ruta 30* conflict. For this article, we gathered in Rio Grande in July 2022 to rewatch and discuss the hearing recordings. Drawing upon the extensive ethnographic and archival research conducted by each of us, we subsequently transcribed and analyzed the plot and discourses of the proceedings, elucidating salient themes through multiple iterative readings and discussions.

We begin this article by orienting readers into the location and historical context of Tierra del Fuego as a border territory, including a brief discussion of scholarship studying Patagonian frontiers. Subsequently, we set the stage by presenting the public hearing setting and objectives. The core of our analysis delves into three critical components of the sovereign drama: territorial fragmentation and security, belonging and expertise, and insularity and ecotourism. We shed light on the power of those vested with the authority to speak—primarily experts, policymakers, environmental organizations, organized workers, and industry representatives—to redress a crisis of sovereignty by reshaping scientific facts, hegemonic memories, and notions of justice and community. Concluding our article, we discuss the concepts of "liminal governance" exceeding sovereign designs in a border territory and "impossible opposition" to any project framed in terms of sovereignty. This analysis shows how the public hearing helped redress the road crisis in a manner that undermined the potential of the conflict to disrupt power structures. In the broader context of frontier studies, our thorough analysis of the public hearing highlights the crucial role of public reflexivity in interpreting and theorizing such frontiers.

## ROADS, ECOTOURISM, AND SOVEREIGNTY IN A BORDER TERRITORY

Tierra del Fuego is an insular and binational territory comprised of a big island and a group of many islands (Figure 1). On the main island, a relatively straight vertical line separates Chile and Argentina, with another horizontal line over the Beagle Canal expressing the history of a region marked by haunting border disputes.

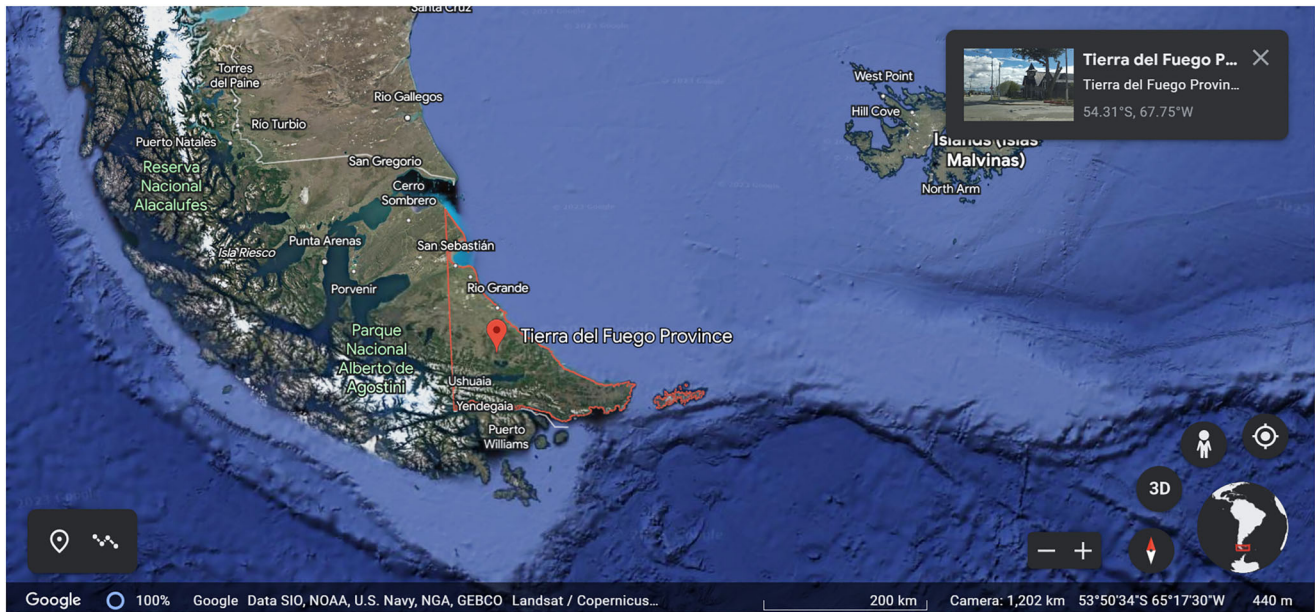


FIGURE 1 Map of Tierra del Fuego. Source: Google Earth.

Following the 1881 Boundary Treaty between the two countries, both nation-states pursued the assertion of sovereignty over a distant archipelago. This initially involved supporting military and capitalist elites to expand the frontier and to organize the genocide and displacement of Indigenous Peoples. Since the 1940s, the Argentinian state escalated its presence and influence in the region while rendering Indigenous Peoples invisible or assimilated (Gerrard, 2021). Seeking to *argentinize* the territory, the Maritime Governorate established industries based on oil, timber, and livestock, fostering internal migration to tackle the perceived elevated proportion of foreigners (Dicenta, 2023).

At the time, roads served to materialize the power of the state to colonize territories, a phenomenon that has been shown in various contexts (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2016; Hetherington & Campbell, 2015). Throughout the 1930s, emerging railways, ports, and roads in Patagonia were constructed along with organic metaphors that framed routes as “arteries of the nation.”<sup>1</sup> By channeling state presence, these arteries would tackle the evils of the *body* of a nation whose fragmentation defied natural laws. Amid border disputes with Chile, the 1932 National Road Law envisioned Patagonian roads as a *treatment* to gather the scattered fragments of a national totality and to heal the disorders stemming from the expansion of military and capitalist frontiers. In Argentine Tierra del Fuego, the construction of Route 3 in 1936 served to vertically unite the territory with nothing less than the National Congress, an endeavor that would rupture the perceived isolation of the region and establish control over a *threatened* territory.

The goal of *argentinization* was furthered with the 1972 Industrial Promotion Law, which, incentivizing the influx of factories and workers, resulted in a 400% population increase and paused the national territory’s substantial deficit. However, the crisis triggered by the expansion of financial capitalism in the 1990s jeopardized the industry, consequently driving the advancement of the tourism frontier. Interweaving nationalist narratives of nature preservation with global conservation economies, past notions of “the end of the world” as a signal of underdevelopment shift into a globally recognized brand for adventure tourism, or what Mendoza et al. (2017) have named “the Patagonian imaginary.”

Despite significant changes over the decades, Tierra del Fuego has maintained an island imaginary shaping frontier politics associated with remoteness, emptiness, and underdevelopment. The impact of these shifts and continuities on the meanings and designs of road infrastructures has been documented on the Chilean side of Tierra del Fuego, particularly around the Carretera Austral. Initiated in 1976 under General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, the route was portrayed as a symbol of security, national unity, and modernization (Urrutia, 2020), while heroic tales of conquering nature in a remote territory played a pivotal role in promoting and legitimizing Pinochet’s regime (Espinoza, 2016). During the 1990s, the rise of environmental discourses led to a transformation in the perception of Patagonian roads. No longer were they solely associated with nationalization and the mastery of nature; they also became linked to global networks of tourism and the promotion of sustainable practices, a shift aligning with the changing metaphor of the desert, which evolved from being seen as a problem to be solved into something to be enjoyed (Rossetti, 2018).

Amidst advancing conservation and green productivist frontiers, routes and scenic roads have been pivotal, serving as conduits for private conservation agencies and global tourism. These developments have given rise to new injustices, including those associated with conservation land-grabbing (Ojeda, 2012; Klepeis & Laris, 2006), the promotion of “seven stars”

adventure tourism with limited local benefits (Mendoza et al., 2017), the expansion of neoliberal subjectivities centered around entrepreneurship (Ulloa, 2004; Sundberg, 2006; Trentini, 2012), and the asymmetrical relationships within knowledge production and decision-making driven by global agendas and funding schemes (Dicenta & Correa, 2021; Picone et al., 2022).

At the crossroads of colonial, industrial, and ecotourism frontiers, projects like Ruta 30 “combine social memory and future imaginaries” with divergent aspirations, as observed by Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (Harvey & Knox, 2015, 6–7) in their analysis of a Peruvian road project. Additionally, infrastructure designs inherently encapsulate manifold futures and hopes (Hetherington & Campbell, 2015, 1993), with the influence of “techno-scientific promises” potentially supplanting competing visions by offering to solve political problems (Kreimer, 2023). Consequently, we emphasize the importance of scrutinizing significant instances of public reflexivity, as they enable us to transcend abstract understandings of global transformations and delve into how these transitions are construed and interpreted in the face of rapid changes. In this context, we find it valuable to adopt Turner’s (1974) framework to analyze the plot of the Ruta 30 hearing and the for-phase model of social dramas encompassing breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration. While we introduce the initial two phases that led to the crisis, our primary focus lies in the redressive phase epitomized by the public hearing—a ritualized performance striving to restore the crisis of sovereignty.

## CRISIS AND THE STAGE

The hearing occurred at a multifunctional art center. With over 60 presenters, predominantly men, it lasted about 11 h. Rumors had circulated about a threatening phone call the College of Engineers received, which warned of budget cuts if they opposed the road project at the hearing. In this tense environment, many of us chose to sit close to specific individuals while distancing ourselves from others, effectively demarcating boundaries that separated state officers, unions, researchers, citizens, and environmentalists. Restlessness increased when a group of men representing a construction union entered the hall; while making their presence known through signages, black union shirts, and drums, they sat apart on the stadium. As journalists got their cameras ready, whispers filled the room, accompanied by hurried last-minute exchanges or eye contact avoidance among attendees.

The consultants began the plot of the hearing by arguing that Ruta 30 would have minimal impacts and enhance the region’s security and conservation efforts by connecting Cabo San Pio, the southernmost tip of Tierra del Fuego, with the city of Ushuaia. With a detailed and extensive account of the procedures, tools, and observation hours invested in their study, they told the audience that they had measured positive and negative impacts and found that benefits outweighed potential harms. While assuming that damage can be tolerated, they assessed its intensity in a particular way, claiming impacts were minimal when evaluated against the long history of damage accumulated in an area that, as they said, had already been colonized by humans with their livestock, sawmills, and informal settlements and by invasive species like the beaver, fox, or the mink. In their conclusion, they looked at the audience for support, relating conservation, development, and security, by stating that Ruta 30 would allow risk control, species monitoring, and the prevention of *huaqueo* (theft in “archaeological sites”).

The idea that Tierra del Fuego is a remote territory at constant geopolitical risk shaped the hearing plot, driven by national narratives and the need to order dispersion, fix isolation, and integrate its population to unify the nation. As a powerful sign, the map presented by the consultants divided the road into three sections (Figure 2) that, by representing separations between Ushuaia, Almanza, and Peninsula Mitre, demonstrates fragmentation and the need for particular connections: Track 1 not only provides Almanza residents with improved access to public services but also offers tourists a scenic commodity; Track 2 facilitates trading circulation, contributing to economic development; by making the Natural Protected Area of Peninsula Mitre accessible, Track 3 would promote conservation, research, and tourism.

## IMPOSSIBLE SOVEREIGNTY, LIMINALITY, AND THE FRAGMENTATION DRAMA

In the public hearing, the discussion surrounding the coastal corridor transcended the purpose of evaluating the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and took on a ritualistic dimension. It became a patriotic cause symbolizing distinctions between civilization and barbarism, order and disorder, as well as pasts, presents, and futures. At the same time, the corridor became a matter of national security: as in the 19th and 20th centuries, speeches produced the need to reunite the nation’s scattered fragments and control the territories and the borders with Chile.

The audience participated in an exercise of public reflection in which evaluating the impacts of the road became a discussion about the entire social organization, making visible its tacit agreements. In the process, society became liminal, situated between the temporalities of a reconstructed past and a future in the making. “We come from a fragmented territory,” claimed the Secretary of Territorial Planning and Habitat, emphasizing the lack of state presence to articulate crucial aspects such as health, security, tourism, and identity. To rebuild a society facing a crisis, it became imperative to allow for conflict so that, even without consensus on the road, tensioned differences could be reinterpreted to reinstate the organizing promises of future sovereignty. As the secretary proposed, “We head to the articulation of the whole, with an identity for tourists and Fuegians, for our territory while facing the advance of Chile. We are talking about sovereignty at every step.”

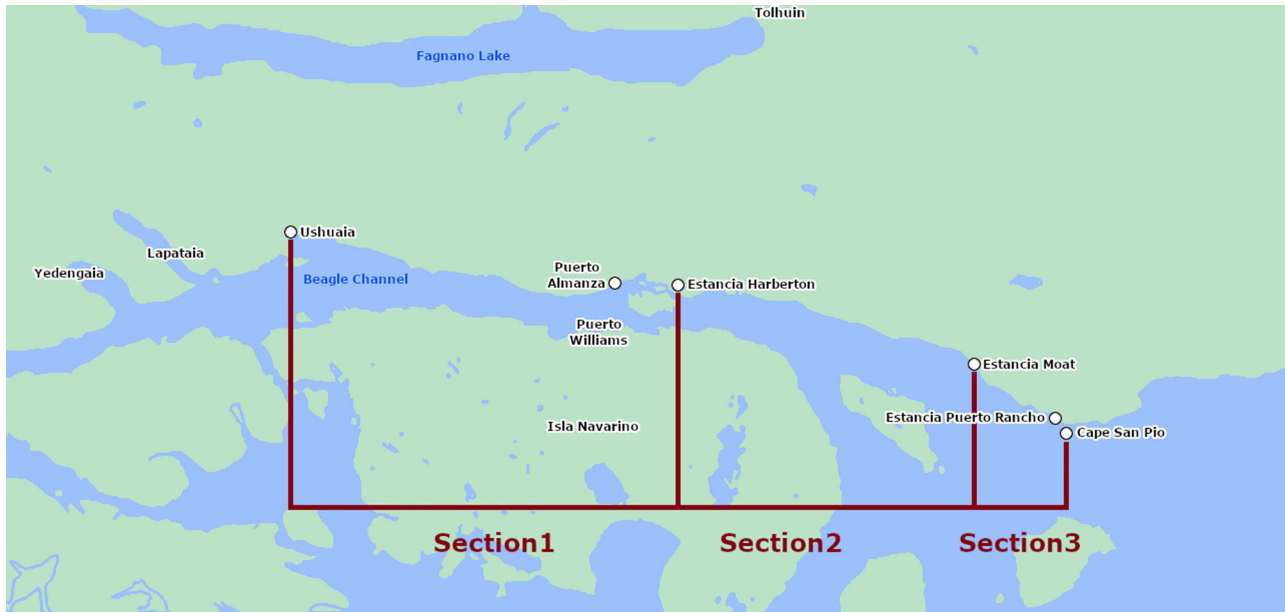


FIGURE 2 Ruta 30 Trace. *Source:* Own delineation over Google Maps.

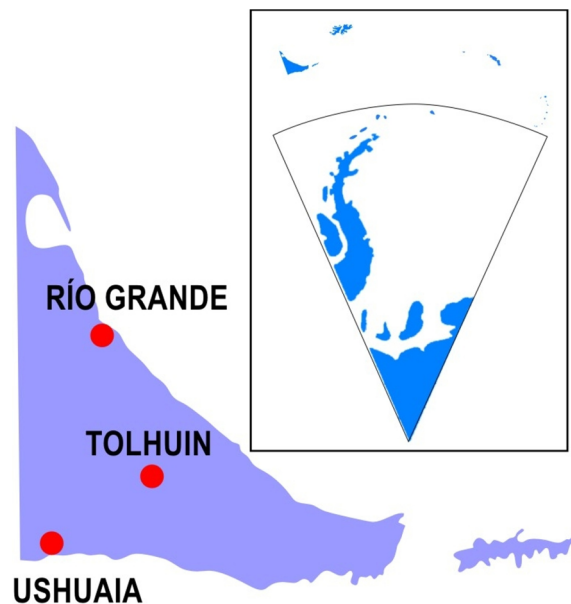


FIGURE 3 Impossible map of Argentine Tierra del Fuego. *Source:* Caritdf (available online: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tierra-del-fuego-s.jpg>, accessed June 2, 2023).

The secretary projected a powerful symbol, a triangular map representing the Argentine territory of Tierra del Fuego with the Chilean side cut off and Antarctica positioned next to it (Figure 3). This map-as-logo (Masotta, 2010), present in provincial emblems and taught in schools, helped construct an imagined community based on an impossible totality that substantiates the need for the road to connect its pieces. By opening new pathways, territorial nationalism could be reconfigured to continue to order, articulate, and connect spaces perceived as “isolated” from the capital, Ushuaia, which is visualized as the epicenter of civilization, progress, and sovereignty.

Like the secretary, the locally renowned architect Olaf Jovanovich also used a map to narrate and prove the fragmented past to be overcome, explaining that such a map “synthesizes the current fragmented territory with little accessibility and connectivity.” Describing a historical lack of infrastructures for tourism, education, health, or security as the root of fragmentation, he concluded this produced “a very insecure territory,” highlighting the reality of the residents of Almanza as examples of those living

in economic insecurity, “unable to participate in the productive chains of *our* province and *our* city.” The architect continued his scene by depicting the impossible totality that the road would forge:

We are heading towards an articulated territory, strengthening the complementary networks between a developed city like Ushuaia and a corridor serving as a gateway to the future Natural Area of Peninsula Mitre. We will solidify a territory that expands accessibility to nurture identity and grants entry to both tourists and all Fuegians (architect Olaf Jovanovich).

The need to connect the city and the interior—perceived as abandoned and isolated—expresses the historical concern for national sovereignty over Patagonia, actualizing an old frontier that reveals at least three phenomena. First, a reappropriation of the organic national space metaphor of a body that must be treated and controlled, a body whose fragmentation would imply a “dismemberment” of the state. Second, the creation of arteries that connect isolated and distant spaces is oriented toward unification, producing territories to be dominated and administered, that is, annexed as biological components of the nation’s body. Finally, the capital-interior connection has a communalizing function: Seeking to produce a regional identity from a past of inclusions and exclusions, it projects a future “for all Fuegians” that integrates “the entire province.”

Almanza, a small fisher’s village, is mobilized as a metonym for the nation and the province, and Almanza’s problems—health, education, security, connectivity—become an expression of the problems of the entire body of the nation while exercising the perverse power of the capital that condemns it to isolation. As the provincial minister of education claimed, the road that would help people access health, education, and “belonging sentiments to the province” also clarified, “because Almanza is also part of our province.” As in the 1930s, Ruta 30 became an artery that would “revert an injustice.” For the minister mentioned above, the school that his management inaugurated in Almanza “is a construction of sovereignty,” emphasizing the epic of “sacrifice” of the teacher who travels “every day amidst adverse weather conditions” from Ushuaia to Almanza.

Represented by the Secretary of Security Daniel Facio, the security forces emphasized “community police” services, requesting new coastal patrols and checkpoints. Territorial control would “prevent illegal settlements” and discourage “improper land use.” Colonization processes and changes in capital and labor relations provoked a severe housing crisis, leading many to take over lands and build informal neighborhoods. While some speakers believed that the road would worsen the situation by facilitating informal settlements, the security forces thought it would improve it by better controlling the movements of people or construction materials.

In addition to Almanza’s connectivity, the drama of incomplete sovereignty manifested in some interventions highlighting the corridor’s potential to provide access to Peninsula Mitre, Isla de Los Estados, or Malvinas. It was also expressed in the need to face the Chilean advance, which already has a coastal route, by building a road “to defend ourselves.” The Chilean corridor became an “other,” a threat of Chilean “penetration,” and simultaneously a complementary opposition that would justify the work. While forgetting that the colonization of Tierra del Fuego occurred through Punta Arenas, sovereignty is today a frontier as fully in force as the Chilean coastal corridor turned into a threat, in a sample of archipelagic nationalism and impossible cartography problematized by anthropologist Carlos Masotta (2010).

The idea of the “fragmented territory” suggests, in return, the projection of the territorializing capacity of the route. Through this infrastructure, conceived by another provincial official as a “backbone,” the road plot helps envision a new territory and re-inscribe the fragments in the national whole, imagined as a great “Argentine” and “Fuegian” family. Such a narrative reached one of its highest points when Luis Vázquez, the president of the Fuegian Institute of Tourism, made his intervention, exclaiming that the route gives access “to the Fuegians” to recite then a history of the construction of the “Fuegian and Argentine territory.” In the plot, the route implies the very construction of the territorial space that will be finished “when we can all access, grow, and enjoy the territory.” At the same time, it constitutes part of the repertoires and action paths that promote a sense of shared belonging, restoring a definition of the national “us” versus the “others” because, as he continued,

Today we feel that the territory... does not belong to us, that we are not part of it... our neighbors on the other side of the Beagle Canal have already resolved their priorities, and they are seen in a frank growth and development... Here is the dilemma: either we grow or are left behind (Luis Vázquez, president of the Fuegian Institute of Tourism).

Ruta 30 constitutes a line of flight to the east, a way of dealing with the perceived problem of location. As Carlos Masotta (2010) has suggested, belonging to Tierra del Fuego is itself liminal, constructed between discourses of national integration that attempt to achieve sovereignty and separatist narratives seeking autochthony and exceptional rights. This condition is shaped by the perception of the territory as not fully controlled, as expressed in conflicts over maps, borders with Chile, or the contemporary demarcation of Malvinas. In this experienced cartography, Tierra del Fuego becomes a border where territory and population attract each other in an exercise of sovereignty while expelling each other in the name of autochthony. Then, belonging becomes *liminal*, implying a separation from the territory.

In this condition of liminal belonging, of being and not being of the place for those who inhabit it, the incomplete appropriation is a constitutive part of the locality’s social drama, and of course, it was narrated in various ways during the hearing,

including the moment when the secretary of agroindustry, in an exercise of self-consciousness, articulated the road as a work of identity and roots. This liminal condition is reinforced by the experience of place, particularly by the impossibility of traversing and appropriating an aspired territorial whole. Namely, that space necessary for national and regional symbols and identity to have a localized anchor from which to be explored, lived, and appropriated for all, including “our older adults or people who have difficulty getting around on foot on long walks,” as Patricia Vara, voicing the secretary of environment and sustainable development, claimed.

What, then, is to be integrated? In the first place, the “isolated” territories of the province—Almanza, Peninsula Mitre, Isla de Los Estados, Antarctica, and Malvinas—under the control of its capital. In turn, this integration guarantees the presence and sovereignty of the Argentinian State in the region. However, in addition to incorporating territories into the national totality, it is also about incorporating people into a territory constituted by liminal belonging and impossible autochthony.

## WHO KNOWS A BORDER TERRITORY?

Governmentality and citizenship in Tierra del Fuego are closely intertwined with concepts of nature and the knowledges of it. Central to this environmental governmentality is the question of who possesses the authority to be recognized as an expert on Fuegian natures and who qualifies as a proper citizen based on such knowledges (Dicenta, 2020). Within the context of *Fueguinidad* (Fuegian identity), citizenship is contingent upon knowing and appropriating nature, a condition that serves as a threshold for inclusion and exclusion, and reinvigorates historical mechanisms of national integration, including the conquest of nature. One emblematic expression is the well-known slogan “*conocer la Patria es un deber*” (to know the homeland is a duty), adopted by the government in 1934. The slogan reflects the nationalist view that engaging with nature is not only a benefit—connected to broader rights of vacation, education, and social welfare—but also an obligation and a means of asserting national belonging (Carreras Doallo, 2012) linked to racializing processes (Dicenta, 2023).

During the hearing, conflicts between experts and the public regarding the use and definition of the territory brought forth the sovereign duty of knowing nature. Many speakers, identifying themselves as citizens, questioned the authority of researchers as the exclusive holders of knowledge and decision-making capacities. A hospitality spokesperson emphasized workers’ expertise as “specialists, whether professionals or housemaids and cooks.” Strikingly, two of the few women who spoke, apologized for their lack of technical knowledge, and identified themselves as “simple citizens.” Despite reinforcing hierarchical structures and authoritarianism associated with expertise, these “simple citizens” defended their right to be heard based on a different type of knowledge derived from the moral responsibility of being a conscientious *Fuegian* citizen. One of these women, Susana Tali, highlighted her 36 years of living in Ushuaia, a citizenship that comes with the duty to know the territory by looking at trees and their roots, or “simple observations that any citizen can make” even without scientific expertise.

Exclaiming that “the Beagle Canal coast cannot be exclusively for research,” the president of the Fuegian Institute of Tourism endorsed the road, arguing that it would bring sustainable development for the region and not just for researchers and foreign visitors who “take over” the territory at the expense of local citizens, defined as Fuegians. Moreover, while critiquing the role of experts in merely observing without transforming the territory, the business association spokesperson claimed that “experts can share all their *sapiencia* (wisdom), but only to improve the project.” The plot of expertise exposed the daily tensions faced by researchers in Tierra del Fuego, where they have to prove their local knowledge and implications while demonstrating the broader relevance of their work within global scientific networks. However, this friction is further complicated by the region’s perceived remoteness and association with being at “The End of the World.” While these visions provide global scientific capital due to the exclusivity of experiencing “the World’s End,” they also hinder local recognition. Furthermore, it creates a very competitive space for them in the Argentinian province that emplaces the most significant international scientific collaborations (Albarracín, 2014).

While confronting the privilege of science is not uncommon, the way scientists responded to these critiques showcased the particularities of Tierra del Fuego. They relied on ritualistic enumerations of academic titles and affiliations to prove expertise while emphasizing their time of permanence in the region to prove territorial belonging. For example, one biologist showcased his expertise—and knowledge of the region—by correcting the speaker mentioned above, who had referred to Canal *de* Beagle instead of Canal Beagle. Another biologist, Christopher Anderson, who is originally from the United States but had resided in Patagonia for two decades, incorporated notions of *argentinidad* and *fueguinidad* in his speech to support his critiques of the road. Speaking with a blend of Argentinian and North American accents, he introduced himself “as an Argentinian citizen and a resident of Ushuaia” before providing his assessment of the road’s impacts, which was supported by “over 15 years of teaching and research experience at the university of Tierra del Fuego.”

The oppositional relations between experts and citizens further sidelined the voices of Indigenous Peoples within the social drama. This exclusion became evident when two local producers from Puerto Almanza confronted the archaeologists. One of the producers conveyed that “once scientists arrive, it is over,” accusing archaeologists of territorial encroachment and obstructing development projects in the presence of *artifacts*. Mr Suárez, the other producer, denounced the archaeologists who benefited from appropriating resources—*archaeological bones*—at the expense of Fuegian future generations:

Some mentioned the archaeological bones, recalling when some people killed the Indians for development.<sup>2</sup> But we must not dwell on the bones; let them rest in peace. Our focus should be on the growth of our community without disrespecting anyone. My children will eat whatever daddy and mummy provide, but they cannot eat bones.

In this climactic intervention, the metaphor of bones as resources and the unsettling image of children consuming Indigenous bones made the haunting presence of Indigenous Peoples palpable. With a visceral and unfussy speech marked by class differences, this scene revealed the usually silenced underlying structure of a society that *archaeologizes* and turns Indigenous Peoples into “past without present,” as described by anthropologist Hernán Vidal (1993b). It also justified and naturalized genocide while obscuring responsibilities with the claim that *some people* killed Indigenous Peoples for development. Simultaneously, the performative act reconstructed Tierra del Fuego as a liminal space between an Indigenous past and an impossible Fuegian future made of its erasure.

The hearing plot reconstructed pasts and their frontier by conversing with spectral figures—bones, ruins, maps—and their demands. Like the Business Association spokesperson who had arrived in 1976, many others had come to Tierra del Fuego after the 1972 Industrial Promotion Law. However, their arrival was met with resistance from those who started to consider themselves the true pioneers of the region or *antiguos pobladores* (ancient settlers): the descendants of 19th-century or 1940s settlers who arrived after the first national colonization plans to differentiate themselves from the newcomers that the Industrial Promotion Law had attracted, a way also to claim political power in a fledgling province. Simultaneously, amidst the rhetoric of Indigenous extinction, newcomers capitalized on an Indigenous past by denouncing pioneers as foreigners responsible for the Indigenous genocide (Vidal, 1993a).

These past disputes resurfaced during the speech of Abigail Goodall, a descendant of the missionary Thomas Bridges. With tears on the verge, she reminded the audience that her family and their *estancia* (massive cattle ranch), Harberton, were the oldest in Tierra del Fuego. In conversation with her ancestors, who held enough power to demand the preservation of their memory, she continued:

For over 140 years, my family, spanning six generations of Fuegians, has coexisted with the natural resources surrounding us. We have prioritized their protection, efficient use, and long-term sustainability. It all began with my great-great-grandfather, who laid the foundations for this life philosophy. He discovered five different native tree species in Harberton, each requiring a specific environment to thrive. Through careful management, these species found a harmonious equilibrium in Harberton, where we grow together; we are strong.

Goodall's defense of her family and their role as founders of the protection of Fuegian natures sheds light on the haunting struggles of the past in present-day Ushuaia. Like other interventions, her speech was also populated by the haunting absence of those unmentioned: on the one hand, the Indigenous peoples who “had lived” and, despite violent colonial methods of erasure, endured in Tierra del Fuego. On the other, the Braun-Menéndez Behety sheep-elite families that settled after the missionaries at the end of the 19th century. While they have maintained significant power and control of vast amounts of land and commercial enterprises, including supermarkets and elite tourism ventures, they were entirely silenced during the hearing due to their historical connection to the repressed Indigenous genocide (Gerrard, 2021).

Goodall also recounted how her mother had transformed her collection of cetacean skeletons, gathered from Fuegian beaches, into an important museum. However, she expressed her frustration with global economic pressures that forced them to repurpose their estancia into a tourist site and inscribe them into part of the exhibit, resulting in visitors “walking through my garden and even into my kitchen, observing us while we cook.” She lamented the attack on their property, where they host volunteers to teach “genuine” Fuegian history and offer free passes to Fuegian children.

## A FANTASY ISLAND

The scenic road held the promise of future opportunities in the tourism industry, particularly within the context of global conservation efforts that seek to capitalize on the region's landscapes and heritage commodities. However, ecotourism has a long-standing history in the region, dating back to the 19th century, when Tierra del Fuego was conceived as a destination for urban, elite, and whiter citizens to seek healing and recreation (Dicenta, 2023). Furthermore, since attaining provincial status in 1991, tourism became central in Tierra del Fuego when it was assumed to support economic autonomy, assert national sovereignty, and contribute to making Fuegian moralities.

Throughout the 20th century, the frontier expansion in southern Patagonia created job opportunities through state policies to populate the territory with Argentine citizens and establish oil companies, coal mines, and manufacturing industries. One significant policy in this regard was the 1972 Industrial Promotion Law, which, amidst geopolitical tensions with Chile, updated the Alberdian ideology “to govern is to populate” while reinforcing the notion of Patagonia as an



underpopulated desert. These ideas persisted and were reconstructed in the hearing, where statements asserted that essential areas of Ushuaia had been only recently populated while reinforcing an idea of frontier belonging based on sacrifice and labor.

In the hearing, the 1972 Industrial Law was celebrated for having “integrated” and “populated” the city, something that the road could emulate. However, the economic boom of the 1972 Law was followed by economic decline in the late 1990s, and it led to disillusionment among locals, who began calling the region a “fantasy island.” The term represents the contrast between the initial dreams that attracted migrants to the region and the harsh realities they eventually encountered, including unemployment, housing crises, and economic recession. It also signifies the rejection of newcomers, seen as a threat to the alleged limited opportunities available for the *Fuegians*. After the industrial decline, tourism emerged as a renewed development horizon that was fueled by the enduring dreams of frontier prosperity, as revealed in the road drama:

The road is about economic, tourist, and social containment... The level of tourism in our city in 1990 was 19,000; in 1995, when the factory closed, we had 50,000 tourists, and in 2021, 80,000. (President of the Tierra del Fuego Legislature).

Endorsing the road, the president of the Fuegian Institute of Tourism argued that it would “improve the quality of life for the residents of Tierra del Fuego” by generating “genuine employment.” The “Fuegian family” rhetoric was strategically employed to endorse the road by appealing to residents who would get the jobs, while opposing potential newcomers by appealing to the Fuegian families and the residents of Almanza as those excluded from benefit of the job prospects. In this way, the road proponents aimed to mitigate opposition and counter concerns about potential disorders or unwanted immigration that the construction of new roads often generates (Harvey & Knox, 2015, 60).

Today, the provincial and national narratives of the region built on internal colonialism are coproduced along with global narratives of Tierra del Fuego as a remote and global biodiversity hub, all intertwined with the legacies of European colonialism. In the 1990s, tourism in the region was primarily domestic and had experienced significant growth after establishing a ski resort in Ushuaia, fomented as a destination for all Argentinians. Within a decade (1992-02), employment in tourism increased to 30%, and touristic demand during high season in Ushuaia grew from 35,000 to 126,000 (Artesi, 2003). However, the national economic crisis of the 2000s impoverished the whole country while making it more affordable for foreigners, generating a new horizon for development that further complicated the politics of belonging in a region now branded as “Door to Antarctica” and the colonially inherited mark of the “End of the World.”

If the images of photographed Selk'nam Peoples had over-circulated since the beginning of the 20th century, justice member Juan Carlos Pino claimed that “each curve of Ruta 30 would become a postcard that will be shared around the world.” For him, this road of progress would solidify Ushuaia's position as a tourist destination, providing jobs while strengthening an image of the End of the World to be consumed and desired by the metropolises. This unequal exchange of experiences and resources was furthered by the commerce union, represented by Pablo García, who offered Ushuaia to the world, stating, “Ushuaia, like us, has much to offer in terms of tourism.” In this exercise of sovereignty and altruism, the globalized road would paradoxically fix the sovereign problems it would create by serving as a defensive frontier to preserve the region's authenticity. As argued by an Almanza producer:

How much does it cost to get a catamaran to Peninsula Mitre, where the penguins are, and take my family? It is pretty expensive. Today, Europeans and Asians are more familiar.

According to Pastrana, Jofré, Díaz, and Ortiz (Pastrana et al., 2020), tourism operates at various levels, implementing international credits and models that tend to diverge from local realities. While contributing to “neo-extractivist patrimonialization” processes (Jofré, 2019), these programs envision local communities as either observable commodities (Chamosa, 2016) or capitalist entrepreneurs. However, these promises are rarely fulfilled and often result in further displacement, criminalization, and exclusion of communities that also become less competitively advantaged (Ojeda, 2012).

While projects like the coastal corridor align with these international trends in Tierra del Fuego, they also draw upon nationalist policies of social tourism and development to achieve sovereignty. During the hearing plot, the emphasis was placed on these meanings and effects, placing tourism as an authentic activity of the territory. This included references to past governors from the 1940s who first envisioned Ushuaia as a touristic city contributing to national identities and economies. Consequently, though tourism is predominantly private, it was provided with an authentic and original past linked to narratives of belonging and national sovereignty.

Furthermore, tourism in Ushuaia was portrayed as a genuine activity due to the significant influx of tourists, often drawn by the allure of discovering or knowing the “End of the World.” The region is associated with the land of Darwin's cannibals, the site of numerous shipwrecks, and the birthplace of countless legends. Tierra del Fuego Island represented not only “the last frontier” for the Chilean and Argentine states but also the “final limit of the West.” Since the early days of colonial expansion, it occupied a prominent position in the imagery and narratives surrounding the “new world.” Today, this edge of the world transformed

into “fantasy” has become a privileged destination for adventure tourism and research, with its history serving as a source of inspiration for tourism marketing narratives.

During the hearing, some speakers raised concerns about the disproportionate benefits privileged tourists enjoy in experiencing the End of the World. However, these critiques were tightened with a broader plot to reaffirm the drive for sovereignty and territorial belonging rather than directly challenging the expansion of global neoliberal frontiers. Complementing this was a notable apprehension during the hearing regarding Chile’s advancement and competition for the “End of the World” brand. This concern arose when Ushuaia lost its distinction as the “most austral city” due to the Puerto Williams population in Chile exceeding the threshold of 2000 residents required for city status. As narrated in the hearing, this ongoing geopolitical tension, symbolized in the End of the World brand competition, perpetuates a sense of incomplete sovereignty and liminal belonging.

In the context of increasing neoliberal expansion worldwide, Tierra del Fuego offers valuable insights into the processes of frontier formation. The emergence of conservation and ecotourism frontiers in Patagonia since the 1990s has been led by corporations and global conservation actors in partnership with local and national governments (Beer, 2023). The way these frontiers capitalize on notions of remoteness, pristine landscapes, and extinction has been widely studied, focusing on the transformations they generate over nature management (Archibald et al., 2020), land-tenure, and power structures (Mendoza, 2016). Scholars have also shown how these capital and land accumulation processes barely benefit local communities (Picone, Liscovsky, and Schweitzer), even exacerbating the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples through collaborations and co-management experiences (Trentini, 2012).

It is important to note that tourism in Tierra del Fuego has a unique trajectory and has long been regarded as a “genuine” activity, challenging the notion that tourism and global conservation would merely expand from centers to peripheries, as demonstrated by the dynamics observed in the hearing. Indeed, we believe it is crucial to take seriously the idea that the global is produced in multi-sited places, as proposed by Marcus (1995). Tierra del Fuego cannot be viewed solely as a local territory facing or resisting global expansion. Instead, it should be recognized as a place where the global is actively created and shaped. Even more, the speakers at the hearing also demonstrated a high level of reflexivity, showing their capacity to not only experience frontiers but also to conceptualize them as shaped by their epistemic and social locations within ongoing frontier matrixes.

## IMPOSSIBLE OPPOSITION: GLOBALIZATION AND THE LIMINAL POLITICS OF A BORDER TERRITORY

In this article, we studied the conflict surrounding Ruta 30, a scenic corridor project in the Beagle Canal. By drawing on Turner (1974, 33), we analyzed the public hearing held in December 2018 to redress the conflict as an event that transformed the road conflict into a sovereign drama. While some speakers criticized the project’s EIA for neglecting the region’s political economy and excluding local experts, all the arguments centered around a sovereign plot, with some opposing the road as a geopolitical threat, and others supporting it for enhancing control in a border territory. At the hearing, disputes evolved into belonging conflicts, narrated in terms of expertise, Fuegian environmental citizenship, and settler histories of arrival. Within this plot, the road promised a more just future by repairing territorial fragmentation, offering economic autonomy, and upholding Fuegian values through job creation and authentic tourism.

Our analysis departs from Turner’s (1974, 41) proposed outcomes of community reintegration or separation after a drama, showing how the hearing played a set of antagonisms that made opposing the road impossible without opposing principles of justice, memory, and inclusivity. Government officials framed opposition to the road as going against “the Fuegian” community, while critics focused on technical or environmental concerns without challenging the road. This dynamic shed light on the border politics of Tierra del Fuego, where the drive to achieve an “incomplete sovereignty” (Masotta, 2010) generates multiple spatiotemporal liminalities. On the one hand, while belonging involves attachment for national sovereignty, autochthony emphasizes separations, especially from newcomers. On the other, belonging disputes reveal liminal temporalities, as performed in the hearing in conversations with spectral bones, ruins, or former presidents.

This sense of liminality achieved a climactic moment when a resident from Puerto Almanza critiqued archaeologists and claimed that he could not feed his children with the bones of killed “Indians.” Such a scene revealed how spectral voices occupying the stage emerged from different, non-coetaneous historical frontiers such as the 19th-century advance, Indigenous genocides, wars with Chile, or the 2000s crisis. The performativity of these liminal temporalities lay not only in constructing the hearing plot and its memory work but also in configuring the outside world and its excluded, turned enemies of the nation (Indigenous Peoples, lower classes), or threats to autochthony (newcomers, international actors).

Our analysis also reveals that while sovereign claims are often revitalized today to resist global and neoliberal frontiers, more spatiotemporal complexities are at play. In Tierra del Fuego, appeals to sovereignty are often used by researchers or organizations who refuse to collaborate with certain global entities due to concerns about their neocolonial agendas. However, the public hearing reveals that the sovereign frontier in Tierra del Fuego is not simply a reaction to globalizing futures but a productive horizon rooted in border politics that seeks to maintain liminal governance. In this region, pasts and futures are constantly reimaged and delineated from the border, with a desire to achieve a bounded whole that, in its aim, creates a geographical space

that thrives in liminalities. In turn, and despite the historical notion of Tierra del Fuego as an empty land awaiting colonization, industrialization, or protection, the liminal disposition of this border territory transcends complete capture. An illuminative example is how multicultural and environmental justice responses, commonly seen in other contexts grappling with neoliberal frontiers, do not manifest clearly in this border territory.

These insights are also relevant in understanding knowledge frontiers, including our own. Reflecting on this, we echo Marisol de la Cadena's (2015) proposal to approach alterity and relations as "more than one and less than many worlds." When examining the multifaceted Patagonian frontier—neoliberal, green, or ecotourism—we should not forget the obvious: This is not a singular frontier differently experienced or resisted according to researchers' locations, whether residing in Patagonia or studying it through eco-tours. Instead, socio-epistemic locations produce and are produced by multiple yet interconnected Patagonian frontiers. Such recognition challenges a potentially tautological approach to frontiers—expanding from centers or a priori explained solely by researchers—and calls for understanding how borders are made and remade in place. Ruta 30 also serves as a compelling example of public reflexivity, highlighting the capacity of research interlocutors to explain and contextualize complexity, generating different levels of the global and the local, the past and the future, or the included and foreclosed.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Agustín P. Justo, "Discurso pronunciado por el Excmo. Señor presidente de la Nación, General Don Agustín P. Justo, en el almuerzo ofrecido por las fuerzas vivas de la Patagonia, en el Plaza Hotel," 1937, Juan B. Justo Fonds (Box 95, Doc. 15), Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

<sup>2</sup> Translation distorts the original statement, as English requires an active subject -who killed the Indians- that was not originally used: *Algunos hablaron de los huesos arqueológicos, de cuando mataron a los indios para que esto crezca.*

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**How to cite this article:** Dicenta, Mara, Ana Cecilia Gerrard. 2023. "Ecotourism, Infrastructures, and the Drama of Sovereignty on a Border Island." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 28: 298–309.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12696>