Anthropological Theory

Haunting as Anti-Method: Ecological Rage in the Wake of Organized Disappearance

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Abstract

In landscapes marked by genocide, state terror, and ecological transformation, ghosts do not simply represent what was lost but return to disrupt settled temporalities, animating struggles over justice, memory, and the ethics of killing. Tracing a personal and ethnographic encounter in Tierra del Fuego, this essay explores how rage, refusal, and haunting unsettle conservation logics and expose the unresolved wounds of organized disappearance. Rather than interpret rage as an object to be explained or reduce spectral presences to metaphor, the article proposes *haunting as anti-method*, a way of attending to ghosts, anger, and multispecies violence without seeking resolution.

Keywords: Ghosts and spectrality, organized disappearance, intergenerational justice, genocide; settler colonialism, Indigenous resurgence and refusal, ethnographic method and affect, multispecies justice, beavers, Southern Patagonia

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Visions of “forest cemeteries” near Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego. Picture by author, 2019.

In 2008, Chile and Argentina signed a binational agreement, supported by international funds, to eradicate all beavers from Austral Patagonia. The animals arrived from Canada in the 1940s when the Argentine Navy, driven by fears of Chilean “invasions,” imported twenty beavers to create a fur industry and modernize, populate, and “Argentinize” the territory (Dicenta, 2023). While such an industry never prospered, the beavers did, gradually populating most river systems and expanding from an initial group of twenty to over 100,000. Yet as they thrived, the surrounding Nothofagus forests struggled to adapt. Beavers create muddy wetlands

where seeds cannot germinate, and since most trees in these subantarctic forests regenerate by seed rather than resprouting, once the beavers leave, the forests cannot return. Amidst visions of forest "cemeteries," beavers have passed from being symbols of modernization to invasive villains. And while control efforts had existed for decades, global conservation agendas began pushing a new dream: one of total erasure, not only of beavers, but also of past "mistakes."

I first learned about the eradication dream at the start of my PhD in the United States. After arriving from Spain with a fellowship from a bank, I knew only one thing: I wanted to return to Argentina, not just visit as I had since I was eight. With a growing curiosity about more-than-human politics at the time, I felt trapped by the beavers and the troubling dreams of their eradication: Why do life scientists engage in such a necropolitical intervention? How does technoscience rationalize animal erasure in a region with a long history of organized disappearance, militarization, and extractivism? These questions felt inseparable from those driving me to Argentina: my mother fled the country in 1977, after years in hiding while relatives and *compañeras/os* were disappeared, tortured, and killed by a civic-military dictatorship that used terror to impose neoliberalism and eradicate more or less organized resistance. I had initially considered working with forensic anthropologists, but it felt too risky—how could I study, or become an "expert" in, the stories my relatives had chosen not to tell? Feeling safer with the beavers, I moved to Ushuaia in 2018 to begin an internship at the *Austral Center for Scientific Research* (CADIC), an institution opened during the same dictatorship to assert territorial control and depoliticize universities by displacing researchers.

"We Should Kill Them All"

While researching the region's environmental histories, I began visiting the archives of the *Museo del Fin del Mundo* [Museum of the End of the World]. One morning, I overheard a tour guide asking schoolchildren why Tierra del Fuego is called the "Land of Fire." "Because we're close to the sun," some replied. The guide explained that in 1520, Magellan saw smoke along the coast and called it *Tierra del Humo* [Land of Smoke]. The Spanish king, believing that where there is smoke, there must be fire, renamed it *Tierra del Fuego*—a misinterpretation that stuck. He then described how the Yaganes once made canoes by carefully peeling bark without killing the trees—a rare but reviving practice. After the tour, I approached the guide, who introduced himself as Víctor Vargas, a Yagán researcher, artisan, and writer (see Vargas Filgueira, 2019). But when I introduced myself, he responded sharply when I mentioned beavers: "Beavers are terrible, we should kill them all," he said. Humane laws "coming from outside," he argued, only slow the removal of animals that "are cutting us down."

Víctor's intensity took me by surprise, and I asked for his thoughts on a discourse commonly heard amongst scientists and locals—that eradicating beavers for being invasive seemed paradoxical when most people had also arrived from outside, cut down trees, and fenced off land to build their homes. His expression grew sterner before he responded:

No, we can't kill humans; it is neither legal nor ethical under current laws. But we can kill these animals that are destroying our Nature; she [*la Naturaleza*] has been here forever. Of course, we can't do that to the people who destroyed our Nature… or should we go to Spain and kill you all? (personal communication, 2018).

Like some trappers I spoke with, Víctor's critique of European trapping standards, which deem Conibear traps as humane for inducing unconscious death, was entangled with anger. But his frustration over the displacement of traditional techniques like *guachis*, or snares that immobilize animals to be killed or released, stemmed not from a conflict over hunting ethics, but from how these regulations slowed the killing of an animal brought to colonize the territory, one that complied by clear-cutting entire forests. Delaying their removal, then, meant delaying a response to colonial violence, including the violence of imposed European animal welfare standards, the same ones that once deemed beavers a "superior species" (Dicenta, 2023). But Víctor's words also carried the weight of *impossibilities*: the impossibility of killing those responsible, "given the laws we have today," and the impossibility of restoring wounds, the past, or the disappeared forests. Still, impossibility does not mean inaction. He pushed back against narratives that question the killing of beavers for being invasive, confronting settler guilt discourses that, as Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, renew colonial innocence while doing nothing to transform colonial orders.

As Víctor insisted on killing all the beavers as quickly as possible, while suggesting that, perhaps, the real solution was to go to Spain and kill *us* all, he also turned his critique toward academics, especially those from elite universities who produce environmental studies without recognizing that Nature could, at any moment, bury us under an earthquake or avalanche. While listening, I recall the stiffness in my body, struggling with defensiveness, catching myself thinking, "Yes, I am Spanish, but also Argentinian." And then, with that very thought, its troubles: the ones my Spanish accent had made appear and the ones my silent claim to Argentinianess had revealed—a settler *argentinidad* inseparable from the histories that had persecuted Víctor's ancestors and continue to haunt him.

Spectral Returns and Ghostly Multitudes

In 2014, the Comunidad Yagán Paiakoala was formed in Ushuaia and officially recognized by the Argentine state in 2021. Víctor, who had publicly reclaimed his Yagán identity in the early 2000s, became the first chancellor. Yet, in Tierra del Fuego, processes of reemergence are troubled by spectralities. As others have shown for northwestern Argentina (Gordillo, 2014, 2016; Gordillo & Hirsch, 2010), Cecilia Gerrard (2021) traces how Indigeneity in Tierra del Fuego is confined to the past, materialized in monuments and street names, while nameless tombs remain unclaimed despite ongoing archaeological interest (Dicenta and Gerrard, 2023). But Gerrard's focus extends beyond how these ghosts haunt national identities, studying also how the communities with whom she works reemerge in a place that continues to spectralize Indigenous Peoples. Reemergence—or *perseverance*, as Selk'nam researcher Miguel Pantoja suggests (Gerrard et al., 2024)—does not aim to restore a lost past, but to bridge a return to "origins" with a movement toward becoming in the

present (Gerrard, 2021: 234). In this spectral context, ghosts can return temporarily, just long enough to reclaim a place in the unfinished projects of the living (Gerrard, 2021: 237).

The ghosts inhabiting my encounter with Víctor carried demands from different historical horizons — genocide, colonialism, neoliberalism, biodiversity governance—haunting us beyond personal memory through spiraling symptoms of anger, resentment, and paralysis. As Avery Gordon (Gordon, 2008, p. 8) reminds us, ghosts are not merely the disappeared or the dead, but "social figures"—unidentifiable subjects suspended between life and death, absence and presence— and when they visit, they disrupt not only the present but the very structure of historicity itself (Derrida, 1994, pp. 8, 126). Appearing in the space between us, what began as a conversation between Víctor and me soon unfolded into a *ghostly multitude*—not a chain of interpretation, but a concatenation of hauntings, of "more than one story at a time" (Gordon, 2008: 25) that spiraled into layered unresolved violences.

This ghostly multitude began with, but extended beyond, genocide and state terror, bringing images of humane traps that call for decolonizing technologies but also of injured beavers caught in them improperly, surviving but wounded when traps are set too fast and fail to work as designed. After my first conversation with Víctor, my research became haunted by these ghosts too, beginning to feel them in the forests, the clearings, the felled trees. Also in the whispers of researchers when talking about killing, or in the time a young biologist spent searching for a wounded beaver who had gone missing, a haunted search that disrupted the urgency of eradication. Ghosts also surfaced when discussing bounty statistics—beaver tails delivered to city hall under a culling program that echoed earlier histories when oligarchic landowners sponsored Indigenous extermination and paid "hunters" for human body parts as proof of killing. Ghosts travelled, too, with the smell of boiled beavers in the lab, prepared to detach skulls for genetic analysis, filling our offices with echoes of animal consumption and of anthropologized peoples whose bodies, too, were once examined through teeth and bones.

The cemeteries of Nothofagus forests—once dismissed as low-value by the same orders that introduced beavers, but remembered by Víctor through ancestral care—now haunt researchers and trappers with questions of grief and guilt. Caring for these forests and their specters, they are paralyzed when learning that beavers have caused the most ecological impacts since the Holocene (Henn et al., 2016). Yet, some remain defensive toward such animal capabilities, relocating agency to "anthropogenic" causes: "Yes, the beavers—but introduced by humans." And still, what does justice look like when both beavers and forests carry the weight of colonial violence? Especially if we consider that beavers, too, are haunted—translocated to serve nationalist projects in the south, they are now reproducing faster under intensified culling (González-Calderón & Schiavini, 2022). Colonized, persecuted, and nearly driven to extinction in Europe and North America during the 19th century, studies show that their fears are inherited and intergenerational: humans are what they fear most, even in places of protection and care (Swinnen et al., 2015). These ghostly layers—traveling between Tierra del Fuego, Canada, and Europe—unsettle borders, taxonomies, and species, refusing to stay in place.

Haunting as Anti-Method

Spiraling back, ghosts not only seek social transformation—they also transform those they haunt (Gordon, 2008: 8). *After* my ghostly encounter with Víctor, I found myself drawn to moments of anger, unease, and contradiction. Something also shifted in my relationships, with family and with silence. As I followed beavers' specters, I began searching through cadastral and police records in Buenos Aires, uncovering documents showing how my mother had been not only persecuted, but systematically dispossessed—papers that rendered her, at one point, unrecorded, nonexistent. I wrestled with the violence of showing her these traces, knowing she had chosen not to attend trials or seek reparations—perhaps, like some of the founding Madres de Plaza de Mayo, as a way to keep the disappeared present. Yet through conversations about beavers, Peronism, and colonialism, specters began to speak through us, breaking open old silences, even if just briefly.

Ghostly encounters, then, are disorienting. Not only must you explain yourself to more than one (Atwood, 2002), but you also become more than one, inhabited by voices in your head (Gordon, 2008:17). Their presence doesn't just invite a becoming-in-relation; it produces a becoming-with many others because living with ghosts requires coexisting with multiple, interrupting voices asking to be heard. And if anger, shame, or paralysis are among the ways ghosts manifest, then an ethnographic practice unafraid of ghosts—and unafraid of rage—is one attuned to haunting as a method, or rather, as an *anti-method*[1] that refuses to manage repression through interpretation. To explain Víctor's rage away, even through a critique of power, would not only psychologize his anger, as if it required justification, but would also silence entire ghostly worlds.

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