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Careful Thinking: Pensar Cuidando— Henvupen Yaconso

Camila Marambio, Hema'ny Molina,
and Bárbara Saavedra

Introduction

Hema'ny Molina, Selk'nam activist and writer, Bárbara Saavedra, Chilean ecologist, and Camila Marambio, liminal mestiza curator, unite in a pluriversal chorus of praise and forewarning. Their textual assemblage is intended as a remedy of the wounds inflicted on them by careless thinking, colonialism, objectification, patriarchy, and most of all by the lack of economic diversity that capitalist hegemony imposes on them, which by extension erodes the biodiversity of the lands that they care for. Embedded in the history and stewardship of the most austral peatlands on the planet, the bogs of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego in the Chilean Patagonia,

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Hema'ny, Bárbara, and Camila set out to repair the erosion of diversity by way of plural *conversations*. They conjure an ethics of *conservation* that assembles Indigenous, environmental, aesthetic, and *swampy* sensibilities. They think carefully and apply their conscious nature to the combination of their words. Saturated with vulnerability, tenderness, and conviction, they recognise that they need each other and depend on their relationship to thrive. The economy of their care derives from the coalitional love that they practice.

We three women feel for peat.

Our feelings border on the fractured sense of who *we* are.

In Bárbara's tongue—ecology—a peatbog is a type of wetland. A wetland is an ecosystem dominated by water. Peat is accumulated decaying vegetal matter in a state of semi-decomposition. This phenomenon is due to a combination of constant water saturation, low levels of oxygen, and high levels of acidity that inhibit the survival of decomposing organisms. As the director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)-Chile, a global NGO that manages a 300,000-hectare wildlife preservation area on Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego, Bárbara works to conserve the 27 per cent of Karukinka Natural Park that is peatland. Her recent efforts concentrate on the urgent need to protect it from mining, agriculture, and invasive species.

In Hema'ny's tongue—Selk'nam chan—peatbogs are called hol-hol. Hema'ny is the president of the Selk'nam Corporation Chile. She lives in exile, 3400 kilometres north of her ancestral lands, in Santiago, the capital of Chile. She holds a national passport stating that she is a Chilean citizen and aches to be recognised by Chile as a citizen of the Indigenous nation of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego. In collaboration with Bárbara, she has been training in peatbog conservation science. The accumulation of decaying peat moss, or *Sphagnum*, a genus of the approximately 380 non-vascular plants or mosses that grow on the bog, is a process that occurs over thousands of years. In this slow, invisible dance between life and death, dead *Sphagnum* become a carbon sink, maintaining biodiversity and also storing large quantities of freshwater. The anerobic atmosphere of hol-hol conserves whatever becomes trapped in its semi-decomposing

body. Peatbogs are thus like living museums that can be considered great protectors of archaeological patrimony that we must take nothing from. They speak to us of the past and protect the ecosystem for the future. In addition to this, they are habitats for innumerable species of flora and fauna.

In Camila's tongue—curation—peatbogs are living metaphors of Earth time. Waterlogged, nutrient-rich, underrecognised, mushy, *las turberas* (peatbogs in Spanish) are bodies of water deserving of care and attention for no other reason than that they are of this world. Camila is the founder of Ensayos, a nomadic research programme that considers Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego the centre of the world. For a decade, she has been bringing together artists, scientists, and other local stakeholders to exercise emergent forms of place-based eco-cultural ethics. Camila introduced Bárbara to Hema'ny in 2019 and soon after the three of them started to explore how to co-care for the peatbogs of Patagonia.

Since their journey began not long ago, they want to acknowledge that what you are about to read is an *ensayo*, a creative experiment dedicated to peatbog conservation that, in this case, takes shape as an informal essay. The writing of which is characterised by personal experiences, individual inclinations, professional permutations, and joint revelations. In this *ensayo* Hema'ny, Bárbara, and Camila are co-learning bog-speak.

Acknowledgments

By way of respect, let us begin by telling you a little bit about Selk'nam country. Karokynka was inhabited over 8000 years ago by Selk'nam people, also known as Ona. Selk'nam history has been officially narrated by countless historians, anthropologists, and researchers; none of them Selk'nam. All of the academics have coincided on one thing: that Selk'nam people are extinct. Hema'ny takes a deep breath, she is alive.

Until early 2020, the Chilean state also presumed Selk'nam people to be extinct. As Hema'ny will point out, this is due, in part, to state-endorsed extermination policies which in 1883 gave way to the last stage of colonisation of Karokynka. The granting of Selk'nam lands to the

Wehrhahn Company, a sheep ranching venture, triggered an indirect Chilean state-promoted genocide. Genocide that lasts until today.

During the early days of colonisation, Selk'nam people were massacred, murdered, commercialised, and their children given away through illegal adoption. This is how Selk'nam bodies disappeared from plain sight. Only the attempts made by Salesian missions, namely San Rafael on Isla Dawson (Chile) and La Candelaria in Rio Grande (Argentina), tried to put an end to the killing and abuse. The results of their efforts, however, weren't successful. The Indigenous population was decimated at the missions due to confinement and illnesses.

A small group survived; they are the Rafaela Ishton Selk'nam Indigenous community of Argentina. In Chile, the surviving Indigenous inhabitants of Karokynka were exiled and violently made to assimilate. Children were given away or sold. Teenagers were enrolled in the military or made to work on saltpeter mines in the north of the country. Some were not removed from the island; however, they were made to work as unpaid labour on the livestock ranches themselves. In dire conditions, they had to make do. It was assumed by ranchers that if they didn't dress in Selk'nam customary clothes and didn't speak Selk'nam chan, they would stop being Selk'nam. This is an untruth.

Most of the ranching in Tierra del Fuego continues to ruin the health of the soil of the Selk'nam Nation. The pounding feet of the introduced bovines releases into the atmosphere more carbon than Gaia can seemingly handle, while displacing native icons like guanacos.

The final official erasure of the Karokynka peoples from existence occurred through the concealment of the identity of the children born to Selk'nam mothers raped by ranchers. These children were generally classified as mestizos. Giving way to the academically supported argumentation that 'pure' Indigenous peoples no longer existed.

The violent history of Karokynka's late colonisation was motivated by modernist ideologies of progress, economic productivity, and a political system that believes that trade and industry should be controlled by private owners for profit. The repercussions of this early capitalist mentality grew stronger as individuals profited not only from the land they stole from Indigenous peoples but, later, also from the tourist industry that thrived due to the lure of the myth of extinction promoted by academics.

For the past 10 years, however, there has been a shift in consciousness.

As president of the Selk'nam Corporation Chile, Hema'ny spearheads the efforts of her people to be recognised as a living Indigenous community. Hema'ny thanks her ancestors for surviving, she still feels the pain of their enforced silencing, she admires their resilience, and she grieves their anonymity. She acknowledges that it is because of their silent grace that she can turn towards the conservation of her culture.

The Selk'nam Corporation's increasingly visible campaign to be legally recognised as a living community also owes its strength to the global Indigenous struggle. Around the world Indigenous communities speak up, lobby, and legislate for sovereignty of their native lands. In Chile this struggle has been compromised by the belief that mestizo people lose their ancestral rights to land, culture, and spirituality. A Selk'nam woman with green eyes is not entitled to be Selk'nam.

To obtain legal recognition for her people, and to strengthen Selk'nam cultural renaissance, appreciation, and identity within the community, is a colossal task that Hema'ny feels can only be achieved relationally. Selk'nam consanguineous kinship is strong; however, it is not the only kinship that binds voices in the joint struggle against the capitalist erasure of livelihoods. The process of deflecting the ignorance that exists around Selk'nam culture brings into being other alliances. Such as this one in the name of hol-hol.

Hema'ny learned of the urgency of conserving the peatbogs of Karokynka by way of Bárbara. Bárbara learned of Hema'ny by way of her work with Camila. Camila learned of Hema'ny by way of the peatbogs that Bárbara and she so often lie on to contemplate the future in the sky. Yes, this chain of interconnected knowing is animated by the practice of learning to listen to the more-than-human; an *Ensayos* experiment that began on the bogs of Karokynka during the early years of fieldwork for *Ensayo #2: A Beaver Affair*. During that time, Camila, along with the artist Christy Gast and Bárbara, amongst others, spent weeks at a time lying on the semi-decomposing bogs of Karukinka Natural Park attuning to the invasive beavers. The silence afforded by beavers gave Camila the opportunity to hear another voice. Carried by the wind, the ceremonial songs of Selk'nam peoples of the past broke open Camila's heart and she

knew, right then and there, that what she had been taught about extinction was a fallacy. But to know something with the heart is different to knowing the facts about something, so Camila spent years tearing away at the problem of the misconstruction of Selk'nam extinction. She finally arrived at being able to see what was there (all along): Selk'nam people and culture, semi-decomposed, striving to exist. She allied herself to Hema'ny and thus began what is now taking shape in this essay.

The wordsmithing that ensues is a performative, speculative, science-based, Indigenously minded, aesthetic activity of *poderío* (power-with). A co-constitutive act of co-caring for the peatbogs of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego and for each other. The feeling/thinking/seeing that went into writing each portion of the triadic essay is an incantation for and with the peatbogs of Karokynka/ Tierra del Fuego. By being deliberately boggy, no one can be stepped on alone.

Turba Tol/Heart of Peat, by Hemany

In the past, my elders, my ancestors lived in communion with all of that environment, which today is said to be in a state of extreme vulnerability. They were part of the landscape, and that's how they understood it. This is why they never took from nature if there was no real need for it; they didn't hoard things or keep things for the future, because Mother Earth always provided what was necessary for life, at the time and place in which it was required.

Yet with colonisation, the multiple interconnected values of our peatbogs were not recognised and worse still, their commercial value was privileged above everything else. This meant that peatbogs were exploited by humans, leading to serious damage. Peat is extracted for water purification systems and sold as a substrate in replacement of real soil, it is now being franchised for mining and water extraction activities.

The relationship we have with our ancestral territory is growing day by day. We were estranged from Karokynka, but as the people who currently inhabit our territory get to know us and respect our stories, they seek us

out and we gain sovereignty. The belief that mestizo people lose their ancestral rights of custodianship of land and of cultural expression is changing, but the convenience of having an extinct culture to fuel a tourist industry is still our major problem. What's more, this interest in commercialising our culture is currently spreading all over the country. This is how the indiscriminate use of icons, language, and other cultural aspects is unscrupulously encouraged, in large part posing as a homage that incidentally leaves a profit for those who had and still have these commercial initiatives.

Some conventions and treaties have been signed to help defend some aspects of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty, such as ILO Convention 169 (2007) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, not much can be done in reality, since the interests of large transnational companies and private investors end up being prioritised, helping them to secure the territories that concentrate the most resources. Chile's Indigenous peoples, even those recognised and integrated under law (which we Selk'nam are not yet), have no authority over the regulations of use of their territories, culture, ancestral medicine, traditional clothing, and ancestral cultural expressions. Patagonian peatbogs have become an attractive new source of venture capital for different kinds of companies and uses.

Currently, we Selk'nam people do not live on our territory. Having been exiled during the colonisation of Tierra del Fuego, we can, however, combat the situation by strengthening or bonding from afar and in alliance with those who live there. One of the most important aspects of self-identification is to live spirituality as part of our lives and not as a myth or a legend that is narrated in books. Today, we are making arduous efforts to teach people to respect our spirituality as a living and everyday aspect of the way of our people.

This spiritual work has led me to see the peatbogs as the future. My dream is to share their value as a way of detoxifying the planet. They are a point of union in the hopeful path of human subsistence. I feel that understanding peatbogs, defending them, and helping them to keep growing is my responsibility as a human being, and as a Selk'nam woman.

Decolonising is Recognising, Valuing, Restoring, and Promoting the World's Biodiversity, by Bárbara Saavedra

Though under-recognised, the loss of biodiversity constitutes the largest global problem that humanity faces today, even more so than global warming. Unlike the CO₂ molecule—the greatest contributor to the increase in our planet's temperature is a molecule that is the same in every corner of the universe—biodiversity is unique to each place. This is the result of ecological-evolutionary processes that are complex, permanent, and often unrepeatable. This living web is specific and different in every territory on the planet and is especially rich in places that are farther away and isolated, like Tierra del Fuego. And above all in wetland ecosystems such as peatbogs. Conservation practice is a nonlinear construction. Like biodiversity it is a complex hypervolume that results from the strategies and actions that can or need to be implemented to change the trajectory of a conservation target, such as a peatbog, or some of their threats. Like biodiversity, conservation is context dependent and results from careful and well-informed planning, activated in the actual milieu of local/global realities—subject to funding, policies, capacities, interests, and many other factors—that exist in the permanent moment of action.

Though America is the world's largest reservoir of biodiversity, its nature has suffered the harsh effects of colonisation from very early on. The well-known massive-scale sheep farming in Patagonia, including Tierra del Fuego, brought along with it, amongst other things, the degradation of grassland ecosystems, one of the most degraded ecosystems in Chile, as well as the brutal impact on Selk'nam people and culture. Another more recent example is the production of flowers to adorn European balconies, which use peat and moss from the peatbogs of Patagonia.

Paradoxically, the loss of biodiversity can only be noticed once it has disappeared. Equally paradoxical is the fact that the global recovery of biodiversity requires efforts that are hyperlocal, because it is at that scale that life exists and is woven. Thus, one key for decolonisation is to bring

back the American continent's *naturecultures*,¹ and to re-establish the relationships that are specific to its life, both human and non-human. This requires, first off, the recognition and appreciation of the biodiversity that is original to these latitudes, followed by the activation of processes that allow for its restoration and definitive return. It is around this process that the deep and intrinsic value of American diversity will be revealed, which in turn should elicit the commitment of not only the current inhabitants of this continent, but especially of the 'civilised' world, which must cease to satisfy its consumption needs through the degradation of our continent, our nature, and our people.

One of these actions was the establishment of the Karukinka Natural Park in 2004, the largest protected area on the main island of Tierra de Fuego, which has been managed by WCS, with me as the leader of that conservation project for 16 years. Karukinka Natural Park holds the largest peatlands of the province, threatened directly by mining, beaver invasion, and non-directly by lack of valuation. After careful planning, working at different scales and levels, we decided to focus our efforts on three pivotal points: promoting peatland value and conservation at the local and national level; protecting Tierra del Fuego's peatlands from direct threats; and integrating our conservation efforts at the Patagonian level.

In a still active conservation process, we have developed research and environmental education on peatlands for years, both for local and national stakeholders. With careful design and above all persistent presence, we have been able to raise awareness about Patagonian peatlands, their value as critical ecosystems for water and carbon balance, channeling interest and support. Because of this, we managed to get the protection of the Ministry of Mining, which prohibited mining activities in Karukinka Natural Park in 2014. As a result of this, the near 80,000 ha of peatlands that exist in southern Tierra del Fuego are now protected and devoted to research. In alliance with several stakeholders, both at the hyperlocal and national level, we are now leading the implementation of

¹ *natureculture* was coined by Donna J. Haraway in 2003 (Haraway, 2003) and synthesises nature and culture, recognising their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed.

a large experiment, evaluating alternatives for beaver removal and peatland restoration. At a national level, we promoted and supported the inclusion of peatlands in the Nationally Determined Contributions—Chile’s commitment to the global climate agreement—which we believe represents a nature-based pillar to guide Chile’s carbon neutrality transformation by 2050. Being the stewards of the majority of Tierra del Fuego peatlands, which are the southernmost peatlands that exist in America and in the world, we expect to focus our efforts on the construction of a Patagonian Peatland Center, which can serve as a lighthouse of knowledge and integration—science and art, local and global, Selk’nam and mestizos, conservation and sustainable production—and guide us through the complex, uncertain, and urgent waters of a biodiversity conservation practice.

Where Is the Boat Going?, by Camila Marambio

In her book *Matters of Care*, María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) advises that if we want to care for and repair the world in which we live, first, we have to learn to know it in different ways. She defends the idea that to leave behind fragmented and split reality, forged by modern epistemologies, we have to think the ethics of care from the point of view of a complex, open-I, that implies new alliances between humans and non-humans, alive and dead.

In the spirit of Puig de la Bellacasa’s ‘open-I’, in *Ensayos* we perform children’s songs as a way to amusingly educate ourselves (and others) about the possibilities of these ‘unlikely’ alliances. Some of these songs can be listened to via the *Ensayos*’ website, under Listening Series (<https://ensayostierradelfuego.net/category/programs/listening-series/>). For the episode of Listening Series dedicated to peatbogs, the artist Christy Gast and I re-wrote the lyrics of *Onde va la Lancha?*, a folk song from the archipelago of Chiloe, a boggy wetland that lies north of Karokynka and north of Patagonia. In our version of the song, we respond to the question posed in the title *Where is the Boat Going?* with the refrain *La Turbera!* (peatbog in Spanish).

Below are the lyrics for you, the reader, to join Hema'ny, Bárbara, and I in the act of harmonising our diversity and proclaiming the future as boggy. Since I have deliberately not translated the song into English, I've devised a score to guide you in the process of wading through a different language: First, read the song out loud. Pronounce the words in whichever way you can. Enjoy the way your tongue twists, notice the difficulties that arise, and delight in what you *can't* understand. Once you've read and heard the whole song in your own voice, you can go back and make sense of the bits you did grasp. Notice the coincidences between languages and write out what you think/feel the song says, fill in the gaps with your own knowledge of peatbogs. If you wish you can search for the translation of words or phrases whose meaning escapes you. Lastly, listen to the song online and enjoy the sounds of a small clan of Chileans improvising the melody while learning about La Turbera!

¿'Onde va la Lancha?

Turbera, turbera, con amor la lancha se va.
La expedición está lista, el zarpe aquí está,
científicas todas contentas se van.

De pronto una niña se acerca al pasar,
pregunta en voz alta ¿La lancha 'onde va?
¿'Onde va la lancha?! La turbera.

Turbera, turbera, con amor la lancha se va.
¿Qué es la turba? grita la niña.

Es un humedal, contestan las científicas.
Contiene material vegetal descompuesto,
filtra el agua y capta carbono.

¿'Onde va la lancha?! La turbera.

Turbera, turbera, con amor la lancha se va.

Es un ser vivo de doce mil años que corre peligro de ser minado.

Nos habla del pasado, hay que protegerla.

Nutre el futuro de la biodiversidad.

¿'Onde va la lancha?! La turbera.

If you followed the score I proposed, you've just experienced some of the back and forth that Hema'ny, Bárbara, and I have had to do to *write* this article. Our boggy process, between languages, across media, space and time, over personal and political histories is a labour grounded in an ethics of carefully feeling/thinking/seeing each other together and apart.

Translation is commonly an act of conversion; but what of a translation process that wants to sustain diversity, achieve confluence, and leave room for the unknowable? Sisterly translation is what I call my effort to translate in such a way that what the other has said or written is respected, opened up, and semi-decomposed all at once. The work of fusing cares, cultures, and concerns is an act of coalitional love (Sandoval 2000).

Closing Remarks

The bond that carries Hema'ny, Bárbara, and Camila through the murky disparities of their assemblage grows strong thanks to the joint quest to see beyond the end, towards a different past, towards a lively future, towards a carefully considerate present, in diversity. A present founded on the practice of equally valuing each perspective, as one does each piece of a jigsaw puzzle, looking to find its fit with the cultures of conservation. This is achieved by continually undoing the very notion of value upheld by each of the authors. Hema'ny, Bárbara, and Camila are not invested in making sense of each other. They care for the others' wor(l)ds. By attempting to feel/think/see together they entrust their power to the other and reveal their vulnerabilities, creating *poderío*.

We have not made sense.
We have resisted extinction.
We have become each other.
We thrive in diversity.
We are not alone.

We endure in trust
and conserve our differences
by caring-together for the same thing
from multiple perspectives.

We breathe life together,
and do this to breathe life
into the bodies and wetlands
that sustain our very breathing.

We stand on coalitions and dream of more.
The Patagonian Peatland Conservation Centre,
where a story-map
as dense as the bog itself
brings together
Selk'nam Chan,
scientific observations,
conservation practices
and artistic interventions.

We give thanks for opportunities,
like this one,
that give us the ground to create
and expand
a collaboratory experience.

We offer to the readers our method,
not as an original finding,
but as a humble construction
that aims to bridge feeling,
thinking,
seeing,
care,
and conservation.

As beginners we honour our backgrounds,
remain in the learning,
we do not claim expertise or power-over.
Our power arises with-with-with each other.
We stay in the with-with-with,
as curious children who sing songs to the bog.

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