

‘Condemned to Disappear’: Indigenous Genocide in Tierra del Fuego

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Abstract

Nation state building, competing sovereign claims, the capitalist drive for land and resources fuelled by international market forces and prevalent racial ideologies can be identified as major structural factors that leads to the dispossession of indigenous lands and in many cases to the physical destruction of indigenous peoples. In this context settler colonial studies continues to work towards a theory of settler colonialism. This article contributes to these debates by examining the genocide of the Selk’nam in Tierra del Fuego through the lens of extinction discourse. It analyses the way that extinction discourse emerged as an explanatory –and exculpatory- narrative for the fast diminishing numbers of the Selk’nam not only among officials and settlers uninterested in their fates, but also among the missionaries engaged in humanitarian efforts to save them. In particular the relationship between negative stereotypes of primitiveness and savagery and the settler process constitute a major point of analytical inquest. This epistemological ambition means that this article is textually based and as such relies on displaying a selection of texts in their original forms contextualised within the history of settler colonialism. It concludes by suggesting that understanding and challenging the role and pervasiveness of social Darwinist discourses on extinction remains a central issue in understanding settler genocides and a challenge for promoting the recognition of indigenous identities and rights.

Key words

Settler Colonialism, Genocide, Tierra del Fuego, Selk’nam, Extinction

Introduction

Patricio Guzman's acclaimed documentary *The Pearl Button* (2015) gazes through the stunning nature of Patagonia and the labyrinths of islands and channels of the wind-swept Archipelago of Tierra del Fuego. The camera slowly navigates through the vast landscape of islands, forests, glaciers, tundra and wildlife while the narrator unravels the story of violence and trauma invisible to the naked eye. In the 1970s Dawson Island in the Magellan Strait was used as a concentration camp for political prisoners of the military government. Also, the southern region was the site for the genocide process that in the late nineteenth century decimated the Selk'nam, Kawes'kar, Yagán and Aönikenk peoples.¹ Although both set of events are located in different periods of Chilean history and respond to different political and social dynamics they share a common link: the overwhelming display of power that ought to benefit from the isolation and remoteness of the region in order to hide the devastating consequences of violence. Both events have been acknowledged by state commission reports. The former by The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report (1991) while the latter by the report of the Historical Truth and New Deal Commission (2003). In relation to the indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego the report is strikingly clear:

It is about a great tragedy. The greatest one committed against Indigenous Peoples in Chilean territory. What happened was an extermination process. It was genocide.²

¹ The Selk'nam are also known as Ona; the Yagán as Yámana; and the Kawésqar as Alacalufes. These peoples were often referred to as Fuegians by Europeans.

² Ministerio del Interior de Chile, *Informe de la Comisión Verdad Histórica y Nuevo Trato* (2003)

The acceptance of genocide is a milestone in the troubled relationship between indigenous peoples and the nation state. The memory of violence, territorial dispossession and social marginality was often silenced while indigenous peoples were relegated to a distant past. In the case of the Selk'nam the genocide was intertwined with the notion that the Selk'nam were extinct. On 7th March 2019, the Chamber of Deputies of the Chilean Congress approved a motion for the official recognition of the genocide of the Selk'nam in Tierra del Fuego and the Aönikenk in Patagonia. However, the recognition of the genocide posed a problem for the Selk'nam community Covadonga Ona as they equated the recognition of genocide with the extinction of the Selk'nam as peoples. In order to address this concern, on 27 June 2020, the Chamber of Deputies approved a legislative motion that modified the Indigenous Law 19.253 in order to recognise the Selk'nam as one of the indigenous peoples in Chile. Suddenly, the Selk'nam came back from 'extinction'. Similar struggles continue in Argentina where the Comunidad Selk'nam Rafaela Ishton (CIRI) also fights for the recognition of their collective rights.³

The recognition of the Selk'nam genocide and the recognition of their contemporary identity speaks to the legacies of settler colonialism in the memory of the nation state but also exposes how the violent consequences of conquest have been ignored or silenced. Along these lines, the racial stereotypes that represented the Selk'nam as primitives on their way to extinction worked as an ideological device that concealed and naturalised their genocide while contributing to the exclusion of the survivors from the social memory of

³ See, for example, Ana Cecilia Gerrard, *Los Selknam: pasado y presente etnográfico* (paper presented at the XI Congreso Argentino de Antropología Social, Rosario, Argentina July 23-26, 2014), <http://cdsa.aacademica.org/000-081/154.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2020).

the nation. By understanding extinction discourse it is possible to discern the empirical relationship between settler colonialism, dispossession and violence.⁴

Settler Colonialism and Extinction

The issue to be discussed here is the structural relationship between settler colonialism and extinction. There is a growing body of literature on settler genocides, mostly focused on case studies in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada.⁵ In this context Wolfe has defined the very essence of settler colonialism: ‘Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base. As I put it, settler-colonizers come to stay -invasion is a structure not an event: in its positive aspect, elimination is an organizing principle of settler-colonial society, rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence’.⁶ Furthermore, he argues that settler colonialism is a structural event that becomes an interpretative framework for the understanding of indigenous genocides: ‘Focusing on structural genocide also enables us to appreciate some of the concrete empirical relationships between special removals, mass killings, and biocultural assimilation’.⁷ Extending Wolfe’s argument, it is important to

⁴ For this article I have translated the quotes from Spanish and Italian sources.

⁵ See Alan W. Clarke and Laurelyn Whitt *North American Genocides: Indigenous Nations, Settler Colonialism, and International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini eds. *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (London: Routledge 2016); Jeff Benvenuto, Andrew Woolford and Alexander Laban Hinton eds. *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); A. Dirk Moses ed. *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2004)

⁶ Patrick Wolfe “Structure and Event: Settler Colonialism, Time and the Question of Genocide,” in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

include the discursive element into these empirical relationships. Hall argues that colonialism is ‘a system of rule, power and exploitation’ and ‘a system of knowledge and representation’.⁸ In this sense, Samson and Gigoux point out: ‘As a system of rule, colonial practices are intended to exercise control over indigenous peoples while appropriating their lands. As a system of knowledge and representation, colonialism aims to justify domination over colonized peoples by appealing to specific kinds of assertions and arguments’.⁹ The focus on the structural dimension is in constant tension with intentionalist approaches of genocide. Moses, explains this tension: ‘Where genocide was not explicitly intended, then it was implicitly, in the sense of the silent condoning, sometimes agonized acceptance, of events held to be somehow ‘inevitable’.¹⁰ This is an important point because social Darwinism is structured around the discourse of extinction.

Brantlinger’s shows how extinction discourse was not only uniform across different colonial actors but also highlights its performative function ‘in the sense that it acted on the world as well as described it’.¹¹ As the colonial process went ahead, a violent pattern characterized by the appropriation of territories, displacement, epidemics, starvation and outright violence had lethal consequences on the survival of Indigenous peoples, thus reinforcing the commonly held assumption of their disappearance. Tony Barta explains how Darwin’s evolutionary theories provided a firm scientific legitimacy for explanations

⁸ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, eds. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., 1990), 254.

⁹ Colin Samson and Carlos Gigoux, *Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples: Global Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 38.

¹⁰ Dirk Moses, “An Antipodean Genocide? The Origins of the Genocidal Moment in the Colonization of Australia,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 2 no. 1 (2000): 31.

¹¹ Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 4.

on the disappearance of indigenous peoples by ‘naturalizing genocide’.¹² McGregor examined the prevalent notion –and implications- of the ‘doomed race theory’ in the Australian context.¹³ By the same token, Wolfe whilst exploring the patterns of settler colonialism –primarily based on the appropriation of the land- also points at the resignation of officials to the inevitability of such destruction as they understood it as the consequence of a natural process.¹⁴ In this context the discussion on extinction related to the Selk’nam also has been explored in connection to genocide and the colonial project. Peñaloza analyses in a comparative way how the role of discourse on extinction and primitiveness operated in Tierra del Fuego and Tasmania where similar colonial projects took place: ‘the ultimate justification of physically -and discursively- exterminating the Indigenous peoples to succeed in carrying out a colonial project derived from a scientific discourse that was equally applied to the original inhabitants of these two settler colonies’.¹⁵ Casali (2017) also points out how extinction as discourse acted as an ideological construct that naturalised the Selk’nam genocide but adds that its legacy also rendered contemporary Selk’nam invisible.¹⁶ Extinction discourse on its own does not account for settler colonial genocide, but it constitutes a powerful exculpatory mechanism that fosters social indifference towards suffering and violence as does any discourse of inevitability.

¹² Tony Barta, “Mr Darwin’s Shooters: On Natural Selection and the Naturalizing of Genocide,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 39 no. 2 (2005): 39.

¹³ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999).

¹⁵ Fernanda Penaloza, “Transpacific Discourses of Primitivism and Extinction on “Fuegians” and “Tasmanians” in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Transpacific Americas: Encounters and Engagements Between the Americas and the South Pacific*, eds. Eveline Durr and Philipp Schorch (New York: Routledge 2016), 90.

¹⁶ Romina Casali, “De la extinción al genocidio selk’nam: sobre Historia e historias para una expiación intelectual. Tierra del Fuego, Argentina,” *A Contracorriente* 15, no. 1 (2017): 60-78; see also, Romina Casali, “Movilidad y uso del espacio: análisis demográfico de la trayectoria selk’nam ante la colonización. Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, 1890-1930,” *Anuario del Instituto de Historia Argentina* 13 (2013): 1-18.

However, rather than fading, discourse on extinction has adopted new forms and still informs modern representations of indigenous peoples, while nourishing discriminatory practices, social indifference and racism. Explicit and implicit assumptions on the inevitable disappearance of indigenous peoples in the midst of a modern world remains a very powerful tool of colonial oppression, while contributing to the perpetuation of patterns of violence. The increasing recognition of indigenous rights, mostly due to the pressure of indigenous peoples themselves, has highlighted the need to combine political claims for self-determination and sovereignty with critical studies that challenge the epistemological foundations of the structural violence that they face every day. The environmental impacts of extractive industries, large scale farming, energy projects and urbanisation threatening the very existence of indigenous peoples are becoming more visible. However, the efforts to counter such consequences are still affected by a sense of inevitability that serves to naturalise dispossession.¹⁷ Extinction discourse is at the heart of it.

The State, Sovereignty and Ideology

Nineteenth century Latin America elites were fully engaged in nation state building however, indigenous peoples were not part of the project. As Stavenhagen argues ‘the prevailing ideology (based on liberalism and positivism) considered that the Indian element had no place in the new national cultures that were being built’.¹⁸ This ideology was intertwined with racial theories that depicted indigenous peoples on their way to extinction.

¹⁷ Samson and Gigoux, *Colonialism and Indigenous Peoples: Global Perspectives*, 277.

¹⁸ Rodolfo Stavenhagen, *The Ethnic Question: Conflicts, Development, and Human Rights* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1990), 47.

Chile was no exception. Indigenous peoples were regarded as obstacles to progress. In the 1880s, after years of resistance, the Chilean army inflicted decisive military defeats on the Mapuches. Thereafter, a steadfast process of encroachment of Mapuches' territories forced them onto *reducciones* while opening the land for European and Chilean settlers. Governmental policies emphasized the importance of assimilation of the Mapuches as a way of social progress but in reality, the emphasis was on the appropriation of their territories.¹⁹ The real outcome was a long history of dispossession, violence, racial discrimination, poverty and marginality.²⁰ A similar process took place in Argentina with the military campaign *conquista del desierto* (1878-1885).²¹ Delrio et al describe its genocidal nature: 'postulating that physical elimination, concentration practices, deportation, enslavement, identity cleansing of children, and cultural destruction constitute mechanisms that add up to conceptualizing this political process as genocide'.²² The violence against indigenous peoples was legitimised with the discursive mechanism of extinction: 'The ethnic politics produced by the military occupation were based on the assumption—widely spread in citizens' "common sense" through Argentina's educational policies—of the near-"extinction" of Indigenous peoples'.²³ It is against this context where the genocide of the Selk'nam needs to be located.

¹⁹ José Bengoa, *Historia del Pueblo Mapuche: Siglo XIX y XX* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2008).

²⁰ Jaime Luis Huenún *Reducciones* (Santiago: LOM, 2012); Pablo Mariman Quemenado, *Memoria e Historia Mapuche de los Territorios de Imperial*. (Municipalidad de Nueva Imperial - Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes, Región de La Araucanía, 2014).

²¹ Andrés Bonatti y Javier Valdez, *Una Guerra Infame: La Verdadera Historia de la Conquista del Desierto*. (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2015).

²² Walter Delrio, Diana Lenton, Marcelo Musante, Mariano Nagy, Alexis Papazian, and Pilar Pérez, "Discussing Indigenous Genocide in Argentina: Past, Present, and Consequences of Argentinean State Policies Toward Native Peoples," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 5, no. 2 (2010): 139.

²³ Diego Escolar and Leticia Saldi, "Apropiación y destino de los niños indígenas capturados en la campaña del desierto: Mendoza, 1878-1889," *Nuevo Mundo, Mundos Nuevos* 2018, <https://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/74602> (accessed April 10, 2020).

The Selk'nam

Map. Tierra del Fuego²⁴



It is interesting to notice that social Darwinist discourses on inevitability do not consider a very important fact: before colonial invasions, indigenous peoples developed their ways of lives for thousands of years without showing any signs of decline or indeed extinction. In southern Patagonia archaeological evidence has traced back the origin of human population to ten or eleven thousand years while in the archipelago of Tierra del Fuego to seven thousand years.²⁵ These inhabitants were the direct ancestors of the Kawésqar, Yagán, Selk'nam and the Aönikenk.

²⁴ GNU Free Documentation License

²⁵ Mauricio Massone, *Los Cazadores Después del Hielo* (Santiago Centro Diego Barros Arana, 2005); Luis Alberto Borrero and Nora Viviana Franco, "Early Patagonian Hunter-Gatherers: Subsistence and Technology," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 53, no. 2 (1997): 219-239; Claudia Briones and Jose Luis Lanata, *Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives on the Native Peoples of Pampa, Patagonia, and Tierra del Fuego to the Nineteenth Century* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002).

The Selk'nam, inhabited the Island of Tierra del Fuego. As hunter-gatherers they relied on Guanaco as their main food and cloth supply, but also from seafood. Anthropological research has shown that up to the 1870s the Selk'nam had complex and distinct social and cultural systems, while showing great adaptability and resilience in the midst of a harsh environment.²⁶ They lived their nomadic way of life well into the nineteenth-century as they had almost no contact with Spanish colonial society. At the time the number of Selk'nam neared around three thousand altogether.²⁷ However, in the nineteenth century competing sovereign claims between Chile and Argentina over Tierra del Fuego triggered a steadfast process of colonization that had negative impacts on their way of life and ultimately on their survival.

Terra Nullius

A central feature of settler colonialism is the drive for land.²⁸ Either for cultivation or exploitation of natural resources, the land is a valuable commodity. In this sense we can argue that primitive accumulation is at the heart of colonial expansion and practices. However, primitive accumulation on its own does not explain genocidal outcomes for indigenous peoples. It is the particular relation of indigenous peoples to their lands, territories and resources that is destroyed by dispossession. The logic of dispossession of

²⁶ Carlos Gallardo, *Tierra del Fuego: Los Onas* (Buenos Aires: Cabaut y Cia., 1910); Anne Chapman, *Drama and power in a hunting society: The Selk'Nam of Tierra del Fuego* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁷ Mateo Martinic, *Historia de Magallanes* vol. I (Punta Arenas: Universidad de Magallanes, 1992)

²⁸ John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650-1900* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

indigenous territories leads to what Short calls social death.²⁹ Structural violence perpetuates a system of inequality characterised by physical and mental deterioration, loss of cultural identity, poverty, marginality and racism. But dispossession required a justification.

The doctrine of discovery provided European powers with complete sovereign rights over indigenous territories. For prominent legal commentators, philosophers, politicians and explorers, America was represented as a *vacuum domicilium* or *terra nullius* making its seizure and settlement a legitimate *fait accompli* for the occupying power. Hereafter, a whole range of administrative and legal institutions were built in order to sanction sovereign and ownership rights. However, these lands were not empty but populated by numerous and distinctive indigenous peoples. In short, the claim of *Terra Nullius* was based on a lie and a fiction. The lie was that there were uninhabited territories and the fiction was that the colonizer –and later on the Nation State- acquired inalienable sovereign rights. As Short indicates, ‘a European power that discovered an *uninhabited* territory was entitled to claim the land for its empire’.³⁰ Indigenous peoples would be systematically dispossessed of their territories and either killed, subjugated, confined, assimilated or displaced as settlers moved in. The practices of this process varied according to the colonization policies of each European power, but they shared the principle that America was a land waiting to be occupied.³¹

²⁹ Damien Short, *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

³⁰ Damien Short, *Reconciliation and Colonial Power: Indigenous Rights in Australia* (London: Ashgate 2008), 31.

³¹ For a comparative study between Spanish and English colonizing policies, see John Elliot, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830* (New haven: Yale University Press, 2007);

Independent Latin American nation states more or less retained their previous colonial borders according to the notion of *uti possidetis*.³² The principle implied that in Spanish America there were no territories that could be described as *vacuum domicilium* or *terra nullius*. However, large parts of the continent remained unexplored and/or uninhabited by Creole settlers. Colonial borders were ambiguously delimited providing space for contested claims between the newly formed nation states. For the first half of the nineteenth century, Patagonia and the Island of Tierra del Fuego remained a *terra incognita* for national elites. In fact, most of the geographical and ethnographic knowledge of these regions relied almost exclusively on the accounts produced by European travellers among which Darwin's *Journal of Researches* (1839) occupied a very significant and authoritative role. Darwin's negative descriptions of the indigenous peoples in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego will have an important impact in deterring colonizing attempts. Although keen to assert sovereign claims to the southern regions, the Creole elites were not keen in using their limited resources in what they believed was a waste land.

Nonetheless, the seizure of the Malvinas Islands by Britain in 1833 plus an alleged French interest in establishing a permanent settlement on the shores of the Magellan Strait prompted the Chilean government to take the first step in assuring its sovereign claims.³³

In 1843, Fuerte Bulnes, a small military garrison, was founded in the northern shore of the

Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³² For a good study on the origins and development of the doctrine of *uti possidetis* in international law see Malcolm Shaw, *International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³³ See Clarence F. Jones "The Economic Activities of the Falkland Islands," *Geographical Review* 14, no.3 (1924): 394-403; Mateo Martinic *Historia del Estrecho de Magallanes* (Santiago: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1977).

Magellan Strait only to be moved some years later to a new location and renamed Punta Arenas (1848). In 1853, the Chilean government created the Colonization Territory of Magallanes that comprised all the territories between the Golfo de Penas in the north to Cabo de Hornos in the south.³⁴ The new region comprised all Western Patagonia and a large part of the archipelago of Tierra del Fuego. Chile's and Argentina's sovereign claim were based on the principle of *uti possidetis* by which the previous Spanish colonial borders were inherited by the new nation state. In 1881, Chile and Argentina signed a border treaty that shared the sovereignty of the Island of Tierra del Fuego paving the way for its economic exploitation.³⁵ Needless to say, the treaty neither had any reference to the indigenous peoples living in the Island nor established any provisions concerning their welfare. The genocide was the outcome of the inherent logic of settler colonialism structured on the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands that frees up the territory for industry, mining, sheep farming and settlement.³⁶

Magallanes: Territory de Colonization

Once Punta Arenas was established it was a matter of time before the expansive –and genocidal- forces of settler colonialism unleashed. Until the early 1870s, Punta Arenas remained a very small town mostly confined within its borders, but a new set of factors

³⁴ Decreto del 8 de Julio de 1853.

³⁵ *Tratado de Límites entre Chile y Argentina*, 23 de Julio, 1881.

³⁶ See, Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, no. 4 (2004): 387-410.

quickly transformed it into a prosperous commercial and cosmopolitan city through which flowed a population constantly on the move: entrepreneurs, miners, settlers, adventurers and missionaries. First, the Magellan Strait experienced increased maritime traffic transformed Punta Arenas a strategic and vital international port that connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This led to a growing influx of capitals and people needed for the support of the shipping industry and the financial and marketing services needed to transact international commerce. Second, in 1867, the Chilean government established new provisions aimed at developing the region. On the one hand, it created land incentives and provided economic support for potential European settlers and, on the other hand, established a free economic zone in Punta Arenas. Third, in the early 1880s gold was discovered near Cape Virgins at the Eastern entrance of the Magellan Strait and in the North-West of the Island of Tierra del Fuego. This led to the arrival of fortune seekers from all over the world. Fourth, in 1876 the massive introduction of sheep from the Malvinas Islands transformed what was perceived as barren and useless lands into a valuable commodity. In a short time, the Island of Tierra del Fuego would become a supplier of wool for the north Atlantic economic trade system.³⁷ Fifth, the geographical distance between Punta Arenas and Santiago exposed the local Governors to the unchecked influence of the economic elites in Punta Arenas. Sixth, the establishment of Christian missions to evangelize and civilize indigenous peoples played a major role in the ever-expanding Creole/European presence in the region. It is this context that brings into focus the politics of representations underpinning the genocide process.

³⁷ Julio Pinto and Gabriel Salazar, *Historia Contemporánea de Chile*, vol. II. (Santiago: LOM, 1999), 161-162.

The Politics of Representation in the Island of Tierra del Fuego

Taussig argues that: ‘most of us know and fear torture and the culture of terror only through the words of others. Hence my concern is with the mediation of terror through narration, and with the problem of writing effectively against terror’.³⁸ For Taussig the representation of terror poses not only an epistemological problem but constitutes a medium of domination and resistance in colonial realities that he describes as spaces of death. Historically colonial situations have been shaped by the use of terror as a mean of control and elimination and indeed this has shaped dynamic cultural process in which the victimizer and the victim become part of an ambiguous reality in which both sides submerged. However, this is not always the case. On occasions the overwhelming use of force destroys the victim (s) to such an extent, that terror acquires its full meaning. To narrate the genocide process that exterminated the Selk’nam is an act of representation that indeed can never replace the event itself but can uncover the social, economic and ideological factors that were behind the violence unleashed against them. The accounts of explorers, soldiers, officials and missionaries that emerge throughout territorial conquest represents the violence against the Selk’nam as a natural occurrence rather than the consequence of personal and collective actions. Extinction was regarded as inevitable. In this sense racial representations had a significant role in shaping states of denial. Cohen argues that ‘statements of denial are assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about’.³⁹ In this context, the use of primary sources as

³⁸ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, 3.

³⁹ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

sites of representations are all the more significant in order to understand how racial ideologies are intertwined with colonial expansion.

The Island of Tierra del Fuego remained largely unexplored until the 1880s. For national elites it was just a vast, barren and useless land inhabited by ‘primitive and treacherous Indians’, and with no commercial value. However, competing sovereign claims with Argentina over Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. As a consequence, Navy officer, Ramón Serrano Montaner led an expedition in order to incorporate the southern territories to Chile. To this effect mapping the territory and the collection of geographical and ethnographical materials was an act of sovereignty. It was all about the territory, however, discursive formations of race became an important factor in order to justify violence and dispossession from the Selk’nam.

From the start the Selk’nam are omnipresent in Serrano Montaner’s account. As the expedition moved into the territory the smoke rising in the horizon revealed and concealed the Selk’nam from their sights.

Since our arrival a large group of Indians have gathered at the entrance of the canyon that according to my instructions I need to cross in order to get through the mountains. From our vessel we could see a large number of fires and from our camp we could see many more, but none less than two miles from us.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ramón Serrano Montaner [1879] quoted in Mateo Martinic, *Marinos de a Caballo: Exploraciones terrestres de la Armada de Chile en la Patagonia austral y la Tierra del Fuego 1877-1897* (Valparaíso: Universidad de Playa Ancha y Universidad de Magallanes, 2002), 178.

The Selk'nam seemed to vanish at the advance of Serrano further inland. However, the site of an abandoned camp served to trigger Serrano's first comments on their ways of lives:

They do not know home, and they are forced to constantly travel in search for food they sleep wherever the night falls: they dig a small ditch and with that sand and a few plants they build a small wall looking West that protects them from the wind...one cannot but think that amongst all savages these are the most backwards.⁴¹

This passage reflects longstanding ideas by which hunter gatherers were systematically described in negative terms.⁴² The precocity of the Indian camp was interpreted as a sign of primitiveness rather than a temporary settlement suited to the challenge of the environment and to the needs of a way of life permanently on the move.

Days later, the first encounter between the party and the Selk'nam took place. As some of the Selk'nam slowly approached the Chilean camp Serrano had the opportunity to examine their physical appearance, dress and weapons. Although, he clearly stressed their dirtiness, he also acknowledged their physical strength and their peaceful nature. During the following days, the Selk'nam continued to follow the expedition at a distance but at night they began to attack the horses. Serrano had to take precautions, but he did not order to shoot the Selk'nam. His initial fears turned into a reflection on their good nature while also providing a possible explanation for their behaviour:

After meeting the fuegian Indians I believe that they are from the same race than the patagones, being as noble as them, but because they

⁴¹ Ibid., 179.

⁴² For a discussion on these perceptions, see Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972); Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

have not until now have any contact with civilised people, or of they have it has always concluded with bullets for one reason or another, they hide, avoid and escape from foreigners.⁴³

Nonetheless, despite Serrano's ennoblement of the Selk'nam, towards the end of the expedition, he wrote a conclusive remark:

Whilst the Indians of this region remain in their savage state, the big island of Tierra del Fuego will not be but an immense mousetrap.

I believe that the inhabitants of this island have a good temper and they are docile and easy to civilise. It will require to teach them about the advantages of commerce in order to attract them and gradually civilise as it is happening with the patagones and with the inhabitants of the Beagle Channel who are far more rebellious than the Indians of Tierra del Fuego.⁴⁴

Thus, the dilemma was posed with absolute clarity: the colonization of the Island would not be possible if indigenous peoples kept their ways of lives, and hence the need to civilize them. Interestingly, his remarks ignore the fact that they lived a sustainable way of life up to that point.

Serrano's exploration provided the first geographical and ethnographic reports on the Island of Tierra del Fuego. Although Serrano's report acknowledged the presence of gold on the Island, it was not until 1884 that the gold rush began. Hundreds of men quickly moved south and spread through Tierra del Fuego up to the islands around Cape Horn.⁴⁵

⁴³ Serrano [1879], quoted in Mateo Martinic, *Marinos de a Caballo: Exploraciones terrestres de la Armada de Chile en la Patagonia austral y la Tierra del Fuego 1877-1897*, 187.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 222

⁴⁵ See John Randolph Spears, *Gold Diggers of Cape Horn* (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1895); Mateo Martinic, "El Fulgor Aurífero de Comienzos del Siglo XX en Boquerón. El Caso de la Sociedad Anónima Lavaderos de Oro de la Tierra del Fuego", *III Congreso de Historia de Magallanes* (Punta Arenas: Ediciones Universidad de Magallanes, 1994).

Not surprisingly, a stiff competition for mining sites plus the lack of government oversight provoked violent episodes between miners and the Selk'nam.⁴⁶ The violence included outright killings, rape and territorial displacement and paved the way for attacks and retaliations as the Selk'nam defended their territories.

In 1885, a Romanian engineer and fortune seeker, Julio Popper, arrived at Buenos Aires in order to organize a gold mining expedition to Tierra del Fuego. His charismatic personality helped him to obtain the needed financial backing and months later he was on his way south. Popper remains a controversial figure not the least because he has been singled out as a central actor in the Selk'nam genocide. The reason for this reputation is mostly due to Popper himself, as he documented such actions by keeping both a travel diary and a collection of photographs. Popper's diary was the product of complex transactions between an already well established economic aim and his great personal ambition and delusion of self-importance. In the middle of these transactions the Selk'nam emerged as barely humans. Popper's sense of grandeur intended that the photographs would be a visual record of an epic journey into the wild. The Selk'nam provided an opportunity to highlight his bravery:

At once we were unmounted, shooting back against the Indians with our winchesters. It was a strange combat. While we were shooting at them, the Indians were lying on the floor, but as soon as we stopped shooting they would raise and attacked us with their arrows.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ For a vivid description of such conflicts, see Mateo Martinic "Memorias de una Vida Colmada: Mauricio Braun", *Actas del 1er Congreso de Historia de Magallanes* (Punta Arenas: Instituto de la Patagonia, 1983), 30- 37; Julio Popper, *Atlanta: Proyecto para la fundación de un pueblo marítimo en Tierra del Fuego y otros escritos* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2005), 133-212.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

Popper was fascinated with the idea of battle scenes where he and his men stood up as brave heroes against the wild and dangerous Selk'nam. But these were no battles but massacres. Even Popper admitted that 'it was an odd fight'.

In this context it is possible to recognize the conflicting representations of the Selk'nam. On the one hand, they are represented as wild and dangerous savages, a depiction indeed necessary to highlight Popper's bravery. On the other, it also reveals contempt and revulsion. This was clearly reflected in Popper's remarks on encountering a Selk'nam woman:

The soil was covered by guanaco bones, empty shells, bird feathers and furs from tuco-tuco; and in the middle of all these remains it was visible a repugnant naked human body from a horrible and old woman not younger than 75 years old that waived her arms and while emitting stuttering guttural sounds.⁴⁸

This passage provides an interesting insight in the representation of indigenous women as symbols of the wild. It is among the remains of bones, shells, skins and meat that the Selk'nam woman emerges as an agitated creature yelling guttural sounds. Popper wanted to capture this vision with a photograph, but the woman resisted:

She gestured horribly, stirred in desperate contortions, made great leaps and shouts, and finally concluded by hugging at the foot of the tripod, with notorious, though sterile, intention to destroy the apparatus. There was no way to reassure her, even though I tried all kinds of efforts; and desperate to not be able to understand myself

⁴⁸ Ibid., 64-65.

with this race of men I undertook the return, always followed by the canine concert, which had not ceased a moment.⁴⁹

In 1886, and almost simultaneously with Popper's mining enterprise, the Argentinean government commissioned Ramón Lista to explore Patagonia and the Island of Tierra del Fuego. His first impressions reproduced the negative racial representations:

Such are the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, a degraded race, which surely occupies the lowest level among all wild peoples. Children of a disinherited country, whose name resembles a sarcasm, Fuegians now represent the crude quaternary races.⁵⁰

Lista's remarks were full of negative overtones framed within a conception of evolution that echoes Darwin's negative comments on his *Journal of Researches*. For him the issue was not about their primitive nature, but about their degenerative nature:

Speaking, now, in another order of ideas, I think like Darwin, that Fuegians are wilder than the Patagonians, and the reason is obvious. The isolated intelligence atrophies as a muscle is atrophied any that does not exercise ... The man who only attends to his physical needs and whose imagination is hurt only and every day by the same outdoor show gets smaller, and gradually recedes to the first stage of their intellectual evolution. This is precisely what happens with the insular savages, condemned to isolation, with no other perspective than the narrow horizon of their native soil, with no more aspirations than to find the food that enslaves, without more society than the family, with no more hope than death.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁰ Ramón Lista. *Obras* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Confluencia [1887], 1998), 23.

⁵¹ Ibid., 47-48.

To quote Darwin provided a scientific authority to his remarks. For Lista, the Selk'nam were not stagnating but suffering a degenerative effect that was pushing them back in time. Not only were they primitives, but they were becoming even more primitive. It was their geographical isolation and the harsh climate conditions that shattered any hopes for improvement. These racial stereotypes were very much part of the ideological background of the violence unleashed against the Selk'nam:

We stayed a few moments in expectation, in the hope that the Indians would surrender; but they continued in their bitter attitude; and as the night approached and it was necessary at all costs to seize those people, for the safety of the expedition, I gave the attack signal, sword in hand: the captain went to the left, with three men; I in the center, and the rest of the troops on the right. The Indians welcomed us with a hail of arrows; and, when the captain passed the first bushes, he was wounded by a crush near the left season. However, the fight continued with the same impetus; and after some carabine discharges, the thicket remained in our possession, and over the brambles twenty-eight dead bodies, including an athletic one, the chief, who in the Tzóneka language had repeated during the fight, the word *corrge* (cacique), perhaps challenging to such a singular duel.⁵²

As the Selk'nam stared from a distance Lista decided to act and the soldiers shot dead twenty-eight of them. There was no reason for this attack. It was a pre-emptive strike in which the Selk'nam had no chance against the overwhelming firepower of the soldiers. It was a massacre.

Popper's and Lista's initial accounts illustrate the intersection between violence and racial representations and its impact on the Selk'nam. To argue for the degeneration and

⁵² Ibid., 60.

degradation of the Selk'nam played nicely into the hands of the settlers seeking to exploit Tierra del Fuego.

Sheep Farms

The Border Treaty of 1881 divided the sovereignty of the Island of Tierra del Fuego between Chile (Western side) and Argentina (Eastern side). By an act of simple assertion, the treaty wiped out any possible national recognition of land titles or sovereignty for indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, the successful introduction of sheep herds, transformed the vast prairies of the Island into a very valuable international commodity. Since the early 1880s, the local authorities began a policy of land concessions that aimed to concentrate the property on a few landowners rather than on numerous small ones.⁵³ In order to grasp the impact of these policies it must be said that of the 2,800,000 ha in Chilean territory, around 1,500,000 ha were granted for sheep farming.⁵⁴ Soon the initial beneficiaries created powerful sheep farming companies that in practice transformed the Island into a privately run State.

Figure 1. Land Concessions in Tierra del Fuego⁵⁵

Year	Concesions	Total ha
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⁵³ For a detailed account of the land concession policies, see Patricio Barros Alemparte, *Legislación de Tierras en Magallanes: Estudio Jurídico y Social* (Memoria Licenciatura en Ciencias Jurídicas y Sociales, Universidad de Chile, 1945).

⁵⁴ Robustiano Vera, *La Colonia de Magallanes I Tierra del Fuego (1843-1897)* (Santiago: Imprenta de la Gaceta, 1897), 306.

⁵⁵ Mateo Martinic, *Archipiélago Patagónico: La Última Frontera* (Punta Arenas: Ediciones de la Universidad de Magallanes, 2005), 12-13.

1883	Wehrhahn y Cía. ⁵⁶	123.000 ha
1889	José Nogueira ⁵⁷	180.000 ha
1889	Mauricio Braun ⁵⁸	170.000 ha
1890	José Nogueira ⁵⁹	1.009.000 ha

Again, these policies did not contemplate any provisions concerning the Selk'nam. The territory granted to sheep farms covered most of Selk'nam territories in Chilean Tierra del Fuego. Years later a similar process will take place in the Argentinean side of the Island.⁶⁰ Thus, the Selk'nam were trapped. The violent outcome of this state of affairs was not surprising: the Selk'nam became a problem for the settlers as they killed the sheep for food. The introduction of sheep herds displaced the Guanaco, their main food source, thus making the sheep a natural replacement.

By 1889, a Scot settler, William Blain, who was working in one of the Estancias, provided an account on the way the Selk'nam were handled:

Mr Wales had given me strict orders not to allow any of the men to ill treat the Indians, they were to be overcome by kindness. These orders I carried out to the letter for a time, ongoing to their camp the men was always absent, the squaws only laughed in our faces, the nearer they camped the oftener the fence was cut. On several occasions I found Indian tracks close to the galpon on the beach, after about midnight the horses would come galloping up to the corral, the men at the River Side had to shut up their horses and keep watch during the night. From what I had heard and as far as I could see other means must be tried. It was with reluctance that I adopted sterner measures. Mr Wales had sent to me two men whose nick names was the Diver and Buffalo Bill. These two men had a little experience in camp work, so I got them

⁵⁶ From 1905, Sociedad Ganadera Gente Grande.

⁵⁷ From 1891, The Tierra del Fuego Sheep Farming Company.

⁵⁸ From 1892, The Philip's Bay Sheep Farming Company.

⁵⁹ From 1893, Sociedad Explotadora de Tierra del Fuego.

⁶⁰ Nelly Iris Penazzo de Penazzo, *Wot'n: Documentos del Genocidio Ona*, vol 3. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Arlequin de San Telmo, 1995).

mounted on to good horses with 3 days provisions, turned them adrift to clear the camp around of man, woman and child but not to shed human blood except in self-defense, Indian dogs was very numerous both wild and tame and these they were to destroy without reserve. At the end of the 3 day the two men returned to inform me that they had carried out my orders and that the shooting of the Indians dogs had the desired effect of clearing out the Indians.⁶¹

Despite any alleged humanitarian concerns, when it came to protect horses and sheep, the outcome was always the same: to punish the Selk'nam. The presence of men hired to protect the sheep herds and chase the Selk'nam was a common practice in Tierra del Fuego. These men acted with complete impunity as the authorities remained indifferent.

A crude account of the genocidal violence was provided by a young Englishman, Herbert Childs, who at the time was traveling throughout Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

MacDonald was crueller than Hyslop. He frequently ran a group of hard guys sent by the estancia after the Indians. As their raids usually occurred on the nights near the first quarter of the moon, these crews always arrived at the estancia on these dates. They gave them enough food for fifteen days and expected them to kill as many Indians as they could, bringing back the bows and arrows of the dead. Jimmy never heard of the commented practice of bringing the noses or ears of the Indians to collect a reward. The administrators considered it as sufficient proof of the death of an adult if they brought their bow, since they would never give it alive and sometimes it was hard work to take the bow out of the hand of a dead one. The Indians broke the bows and arrows when they saw that they had no escape. These bows and arrows, when taken, were sold as souvenirs on ships passing through the Strait.⁶²

⁶¹ William Blain (n.d.) *Journal of a Sheep-Farmer, 1891-1898*. Unpublished Manuscript. <http://patlibros.org/dwb/index.php?lan=eng> (accessed July 27, 2020).

⁶² Herbert Childs, *El Jimmy: Bandido de la Patagonia* (Punta Arenas: Ediciones Universidad de Magallanes [1936] 1997), 51.

These armed men chased the Selk'nam for their incursions on private property. To collect the bows and arrows was a proof of their success but also a proof of killings. Forensic evidence of these killings was uncovered by the Nordenskjöld expedition (1895-1897). The expedition received reports of three skeletons lying in a location close to the Estancia Springhill. The reports also added that these Selk'nam were killed in 1884 by men working for the Sheep Farm as retaliation for sheep stealing. In the location the crew found three mummified human corpses that were taken on board the Swedish vessel. A full osteological examination of the bones was performed back in Stockholm and it revealed bullet wounds in their skulls in what constituted clear evidence that the Selk'nam were killed execution-style while in captivity.⁶³

Another dimension that needs to be addressed is the gendered nature of violence. Often this dimension has been silenced or overlooked, but kidnapping, torture, killings and rape of Selk'nam women played a major part in the landscape of horror. Following Woodworth-Ney, sexual violence played an important function in settler societies: 'White men appropriated Indian women's sexuality as part of the process of conquering Native territories'.⁶⁴ Popper recalled an incident that took place in one of the sheep farms:

They had there for some time a captive Indian woman, about sixteen years old, which refused to accept all kinds of food in the first eight days of captivity. On the ninth day they put a sheep in front of her, and then, although reluctantly and showing gestures of displeasure, she prepared for lunch. The lunch lasted three consecutive hours; and when Indian woman took a little rest, she presented such an aspect that anyone, ignoring the background of the case, had claimed that it

⁶³ Mateo Martinic, "El genocidio Selk'nam: nuevos antecedentes," *Anales del Instituto de la Patagonia* 19 (1989), 23-28.

⁶⁴ Laura Woodworth-Ney, *Women in the American West* (Santa Barbara, CA: ACL-CLIO 2008), 744.

was in a highly interesting state. It is also true that the sheep had disappeared.⁶⁵

The narration represents the captive young Selk'nam woman as a wild and untamed animal.

Dehumanizing Selk'nam women justified sexual aggression:

Often, if the men without a boss found *chinas* alone they would take one for each and camped somewhere nice, spending the time with them instead of hunting and killing as they were supposed to do. If there weren't enough Indian women for everyone, they used them in the best way possible. None of the fuegians were good-looking, certainly not the crude and ugly women who were dirty more than imaginable, so dirty that even these hard guys touched them as little as possible until they were washed. They tied them outside their tents, as if they were horses, until they had time to take them to a river, there they cut their long hair and gave them a good brush with a small brush that each member of the gang carried for that purpose.⁶⁶

The issue of sexual exploitation of Selk'nam women was an integral part of the process of the process of territorial control:

The miners who camped on the island also attacked the Indian camps for their women and after the usual brushing, they lived with them until they had extracted enough gold and left the Island or until the women were so notoriously pregnant that they let them go.⁶⁷

This account points to Douglas's distinction of dirt as meaning pathogenicity and hygiene but also something out of place.⁶⁸ In this last sense, Selk'nam women defied the clear-cut boundaries of civilized men thus the act of cleaning acted as a filter that brought them into their domain.

⁶⁵ Julio Popper, "Exploración de la Tierra del Fuego," *Boletín del Instituto Geográfico Argentino* 8 (2003), 86.

⁶⁶ Herbert Childs, *El Jimmy: Bandido de la Patagonia* (Punta Arenas: Ediciones Universidad de Magallanes, [1936] 1997), 52.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (London: Routledge 2002), 30-41.

Altogether, the violent practices perpetrated against the Selk'nam point to an unofficial policy of annihilation carried out by the settlers and miners. Local authorities remained largely indifferent if not outright complicit. However, from the early 1890s this state of affairs would gradually come to a halt as the Salesian missionaries opened their missions in Dawson Island (1889) and Rio Grande (1893). It was all too easy to carry out violent acts against the Selk'nam completely out of the public view, but it was something else to have missionaries on the ground that could denounce such violence. Nonetheless, the missions facilitated a different outcome: the removal of the Selk'nam from Tierra del Fuego and their death through infectious diseases.

The Removal

A frequent feature of settler societies was the tension between extermination and removal policies.⁶⁹ In Tierra del Fuego extermination was a final solution, but humanitarian concerns raised by Salesian missionaries and politicians in the National Congress sought an alternative measure: the removal of the Selk'nam from their territories to missions where they could be civilized and protected. The idea was not original as it was a common practice in missions elsewhere. The Chilean government conceded the use of Dawson Island (1890) while the Argentinean government granted a land concession in Rio Grande, in the Island

⁶⁹ For comparative perspectives, see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); James Wilson *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America* (London: Picador, 1998); Henry Reynolds *Dispossession: Black Australia and White Invaders* (Sidney: Allen & Unwin Academic, 1989); Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996).

of Tierra del Fuego (1893). Indeed, for both governments it was a way of showing humanitarian concerns, an attitude always politically helpful in the absence of specific indigenous policies.

In this new context, the Selk'nam were captured and sent to the mission at Dawson Island.

Once again Blain's diary recorded how this policy unfolded:

In the meantime the Philips Bay Indians were showing no respect for these promises made in the month of August, instead of coming into the settlements for meat they were killing whatever suited themselves, burying the skins - another expedition went out to call them in question, about the 19 November the expedition returned with about 40 prisoners including men women and children, the men were disarmed and handcuffed in pairs, the women and children had no additional inconvenience, at nights they were lodged in a large iron shed, only the men were put in irons but got their freedom first thing in the morning, a man stood by them during the day with a loaded rifle, they were prisoners from the 19 November to January 13 when they were shipped to the mission station on Dawson Island, not any of them attempted to escape during their imprisonment.⁷⁰

The efforts to convince the Selk'nam not to kill the sheep proved unsuccessful. This is a perfect example of how settler societies unilaterally imposed alien obligations to indigenous peoples while expecting them to agree to abide by them. However, this time the Selk'nam were not killed but captured in large numbers. The use of handcuffs, irons, the threat of armed guards and over two months of captivity, parallels their treatment as prisoners. Finally, they were shipped to Dawson Island on board of the Mission ship or on a vessel rented by the Governor or Sheep Farming companies.

⁷⁰ William Blain (n.d.) *Journal of a Sheep-Farmer, 1891-1898*.

However, the removal policy did not stop violent clashes between sheep farmers and the Selk'nam. In 1894, the newspaper *El Magallanes* demanded a radical solution to what it described as a national embarrassment:

As a last resource, an extermination campaign against the adult Indians could be made and the children could be left in charge of the Salesians since they believe they can civilize them, so we do not see repeated scenes like the previous one that embarrass a country like Chile that occupies a place between civilized nations.⁷¹

Here the newspaper –echoing the voice of the Sheep farming Companies- directly argued for extermination. The genocidal dimension of this proposal is self-evident. What is paradoxical here is that the violent clashes were regarded as a national embarrassment because it questioned the civilized nature of Chile, but at the same time an extermination campaign seemed to be a civilized action. The Selk'nam were represented as an obstacle to progress and as such they had to be subjugated or exterminated.⁷² Echoing, Sarmiento it was a fight between *civilization and barbarism*.⁷³

In December 1895 the sheep farming companies filed a libel suit demanding the Chilean government for a definite solution to the Selk'nam. They stopped short of asking for an extermination campaign. Instead they requested their complete removal from the Island:

⁷¹ *El Magallanes*, March 11, 1894.

⁷² Similar patterns to westward expansion in the United States, See, Thomas R Berger, *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas, 1492-1992* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991)

⁷³ Domingo Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie en las Pampas Argentinas* (Madrid: Cátedra, [1845] 1990)

If this action does not take place (the extraction of the natives from their native soil), the Government of Chile counts on the fact that in a year or two the Tierra del Fuego will be as wild as before we established our laborious industrial estates, they will be ruined as well as the loss of huge capitals and this will result in a notable delay of this prosperous region.⁷⁴

As often in economic projects implemented in indigenous territories, indigenous peoples are represented as obstacles to pastoralist or industrial development. The sheep farming companies represented themselves as the embodiment of civilization by transforming the wild through their entrepreneurship. Indeed, it had a redemptive overtone. On the contrary, the Selk'nam were represented as the embodiment of savagery and backwardness.

In 1895, the Governor Manuel Señoret decided to shift the policy that sent the Selk'nam to the Salesian mission at Dawson Island. In seeking to discredit the Salesian efforts, he sent 165 Selk'nam to Punta Arenas. As soon as they arrived, the children were separated from their parents and given to local families while the adults were given to families as workers. However, most of them remained confined in a camp established at the outskirts of the city. Many died from infectious diseases. Señoret's decision provoked an outcry from the missionaries, the national press and some of the local residents to the extent that it prompted a judicial inquiry. Although the policy was reversed, and the surviving Selk'nam were sent back to Dawson Island, Señoret continued to push for a final solution. However, in 1896, he changed his strategy. In his annual report to the government he posed the problem:

⁷⁴ Mateo Martinic, "Panorama de la Colonización en Tierra del Fuego entre 1891-1900," *Anales del Instituto de la Patagonia* 4. No. 1-3 (1973): 39

Of course, the Tierra del Fuego, almost unknown, populated by Indians who believed that the sheep placed on their soil was a product of the land, was a field of little use for the establishment of industries. They have had to fight against the depredations of the Indians and suffer serious losses that have slowed their development. Right now, there is a relatively large white population, fences, etc., the Indians make frequent robberies causing serious damage.⁷⁵

This passage echoes the sheep farmers concerns on the damages produced by the Selk'nam but silencing the violent retaliations against them. Interestingly, in the same report Señoret provides a very positive image of the Selk'nam:

Their physiognomy is pleasant, very different from the almost disgusting appearance of the alacalufes. Somewhat coppery complexion, pronounced features, admirable dentures, everything in them indicates that they belong to a strong, beautiful, agile race, whose rich blood will probably become extinct and does not mix with that of the other weakened tribes.⁷⁶

A number of things spring from this passage. First, the strong physical attributes of the Selk'nam were contrasted to other Fuegians (Yagán and Kawésqar) as these were depicted as *weakened tribes*. This was a racial contrast that would be accentuated and expanded by subsequent writers who divided the Fuegians into superior and inferior races. Second, he uses the notion of extinction in order to strengthen his case for complete removal. Next, he praised their good nature and adaptability towards civilization:

They are intelligent and even docile when they are well treated. The group brought to Punta Arenas in August 1895 were at least fifteen to twenty adults who in a few months have demonstrated the ease with which civilization habits are adopted. Children lend themselves

⁷⁵ Manuel Señoret, *Memoria del Gobernador de Magallanes: La Tierra del Fuego I sus Naturales* (Santiago: Imprenta Nacional, 1896),13-14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

admirably to change their way of life and especially when they are in the hands of families where they see the uses and customs of the civilized people. They got so used to their new life that they have a real horror of returning to the indigenous camp, even next to their parents.⁷⁷

This passage refers to the arrival of the Selk'nam to Punta Arenas. However, in his account he completely ignores the deadly consequences that his decision had on their welfare. By emphasizing the good nature of the Selk'nam and their easy adaptation to civilization he was justifying his own plan:

Now how to attract civilization to this interesting, intelligent and vigorous people? How to harmonize their existence on the large island of Tierra del Fuego with the industrial interests that have been established there and must be established in a short time?⁷⁸

Civilization provided not an obstacle but an opportunity for assimilation:

There has been no example in the history of the world that a wild people could have been civilized without the civilizing people mixing with them to transmit cultural habits, dominating their resistance and distrust and awakening new feelings and new ideas in them.⁷⁹

The idea was to transform the Island of Tierra del Fuego in a civilizing enterprise, where the combination of economic industries and military surveillance would enable the Selk'nam to become civilized:

If small military posts were created in the indigenous territory, it is undoubted, given the character of the Indians and the no means of mobility available to them, that it would be enough to keep them calm

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 36.

and avoid the theft and slaughter of cattle that harm both the sheep farmers and that are the origin of the struggle between barbarians and civilized.⁸⁰

Finally, he concludes by describing how his plan would bring together both humanitarian and industrial concerns:

That way the end would be reached soon without violating humanitarian feelings, harmonizing them, on the contrary, with the industrial and colonization interests that we want to settle on the great island of Tierra del Fuego.⁸¹

Indeed, Señoret's plan was the most detailed plan elaborated in relation to the Selk'nam. The positive representations on their good nature and attributes were no more than rhetorical devices used for persuading the Government on the need of removal. Closer to his real intentions was another plan proposed by the Sheep Farming Companies around the same time:

... The extraction of the Ona Indians from Tierra del Fuego is an act of humanity that the government cannot refuse, and the only thing that could be left to resolve after a convenient study is where and how to place these Indians.⁸²

Ramón Serrano Monatner, a close friend of Señoret, was even clearer:

Above all these miseries is the convenience and even the need to conclude soon with the civilization of the Ona Indians (Fuegians

⁸⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁸¹ Ibid., 37.

⁸² Guerrero Bascuñán, *Memoria que el delegado del Supremo Gobierno en el Territorio de Magallanes Don Mariano Guerrero Bascuñán presenta al Ministerio de Colonización*. Vol I. (Santiago: Imprenta i Librería Ercilla, 1897), 148.

inhabitants of the large island of Tierra del Fuego). This is a relatively easy task because it is not a numerous race, which has shown signs of being fit for work and inhabits only in one island. A small cavalry picket could easily, during one or two seasons of the most favourable season, pick them all up and send them to Punta Arenas or to the place they thought was most convenient for this aim; the working population of the colony would be increased and in a short time and this source of immorality would disappear.⁸³

Here there was no ennobling process of the Selk'nam. The military action required had to be fast and total in order to be efficient. Of course, this action was wrapped up in civilizing terms:

Not only would this measure prevent Indians from continuing to commit their depredations in Tierra del Fuego and hindering the development of the livestock industry, but they would be preserved from the hostilities that they are currently victims, also they would be placed in a position to be incorporated into civilization in a short number of years and a vigorous race suitable for all kinds of jobs would be preserved.⁸⁴

At the same time, negative depictions on indigenous peoples in Tierra del Fuego continued:

The Fuegian Indian is by nature inclined to laziness, indolent in spirit and they have no capacity for civilization and to carry out noble actions. That is why it is said that Fuegians have the sad honor of occupying the lowest rank on the scale of civilization, because they relate more with beasts than with men. They live as brutes, and little by little this race disappears without leaving the miserable rank it occupies on the scale of humanity. In their physiognomy they reveal the barbarism and the backwardness in which they live.⁸⁵

⁸³ Paula Grendi and Carlos Vega ed. *Vejámenes Inferidos a Indígenas de Tierra del Fuego* (Punta Arenas: Ateli, 2002), 212.

⁸⁴ Guerrero Bascañan, *Memoria que el delegado del Supremo Gobierno en el Territorio de Magallanes Don Mariano Guerrero Bascañán presenta al Ministerio de Colonización*. Vol 1, 152.

⁸⁵ Robustiano Vera, *La Colonia de Magallanes I Tierra del Fuego (1843-1897)*, (Santiago: Imprenta de la Gaceta, 1897), 312-313.

The passage closely follows Darwin's remarks thus providing scientific authority to the negative racial representations. Furthermore, as proof of their degradation and savagery the author invokes cannibal practices:

They eat those who kill in the fighting and the same fate runs for the defeated. The women devour the arms and chest and the men feed themselves with the legs. The skeleton is thrown into the sea. They also eat human flesh because of hunger and in the winter when they lack food they devour old women and prefer them to their dogs, because the dogs help them in hunting otters.⁸⁶

As Taussig indicates: 'Cannibalism summed up all that was perceived as grotesquely different about the Indian as well as providing for the colonists the allegory of colonization itself'.⁸⁷

Martinic explains that Señoret's actions were widely condemned by public opinion in Punta Arenas. They were highly critical of his passivity towards sheep farmers actions even when he changed his tone towards the end of his office.⁸⁸ However, to some extent his actions were condoned by the central government. In one occasion as the report of violent incidents against the Selk'nam reached the capital, the government advised Señoret to: 'avoid getting involved in the matter'.⁸⁹ Martinic provides a harsh assessment of the role played by Señoret and subsequent Governors in relation to the Selk'nam: 'We insist, none of them can evade the harsh judgment of posterity. Their abrupt irresolution or the implicit

⁸⁶ Ibid., 313-314.

⁸⁷ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 105.

⁸⁸ Mateo Martinic, "La Política Indígena de los Gobernadores de Magallanes 1843-1910," *Anales Instituto de la Patagonia* 10 (1979): 7-58.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 44.

permission to let do makes them, before history, accomplices for gross negligence in the genocide of the Selk'nam race'.⁹⁰

The Missions

In 1869 the Anglican South American Missionary Society (SAMS) established a mission in Ushuaia. In 1889 the Catholic Salesian Order (SDB) established a mission in Dawson Island and in 1893 in Rio Grande.⁹¹ Missionary mindsets were informed by two intertwined ideological factors: civilization and evangelization. In this sense indigenous assimilation was regarded as imperative and the necessary first step for conversion. However, there was another concern: to protect indigenous peoples against the violence of settlers and miners. Missionaries witnessed how the Fuegians had been killed, how their women had been raped, how they were drawn to alcohol, how they were displaced and how they had suffered infectious deadly diseases like syphilis and tuberculosis.

The Salesian Order led by Monsignor José Fagnano developed a plan to civilise and protect the Selk'nam. In 1899 he petitioned the Chilean government for the concession of Dawson Island, in the Magellan Strait. Writing to President Balmaceda he explained the benefits of the missionary project for both indigenous peoples and settlers:

... the great advantages it would bring to the territory of Magellan, when all the Indians attracted by the Law of the Gospel and the community of life will begin to

⁹⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁹¹ The Anglicans published *Voice of Pity for South America* (1854 - 1862), *Voice for South America* (1863 - 1866) and the *South American Missionary Magazine* (1867 - to the present). The Salesians published *Bolletino Salesiano* (1877 - to the present).

live in a Christian way and, instead of being hostile to Christians, they will be useful men for work.⁹²

The aims of the mission were twofold: it was a way of protecting the Selk'nam from settler violence and it was educational. Berkhofer explains the importance of missionary educational practices: 'Since conversion to Christ and civilization was conceived as an instructional problem, mission stations were educational establishments in the broadest sense. There the Selk'nam would be persuaded by 'right reason' and rationally calculated self-interest to adopt the white religion and ways, and would learn how to pray, farm, and behave'.⁹³ Reporting on the visit of the Chilean President to the Mission in 1899 the benefits of the civilizing process were clearly stated:

Each visitor received gifts from the priests of the Mission and from the civilized savages. Bows, arrows, baskets and some other more valuable gifts, such as bed covers, underpants, flannels and crafts which they accepted with great interest and gratitude. The visitors had words of supreme praise for the progress of the Mission, wishing every good to the Superiors and to the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, of whom they praised the industriousness, the self-sacrifice and the sacrifice in making common life with the indigenous Onas of Tierra del Fuego, the most wretched and unhappy race that exists on the face of the earth.⁹⁴

However, over the years disease was rife and mortality high among the Selk'nam living at the Missions in Dawson Island and in Rio Grande. The tragic paradox was that instead of protecting the Selk'nam the Missions became a death trap. Thereafter, extinction became a theme that began to appear in missionary writing. It seemed an unstoppable outcome to

⁹² Simón Kuzmanich, *Presencia Salesiana 100 Años en Chile: La Expansión: 1888- 1920* (Santiago: Editorial Salesiana, 1990), 49.

⁹³ Robert F. Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1965), 15.

⁹⁴ *Il Bollettino Salesiano*, August 1899, 208.

which the missionaries seemed to have no answer. The spiritual meaning ascribed to the death of a Selk'nam girl, Candida Donoso, exemplifies the contradictory nature of the missionary effort:

The death of this Indian woman was really precious and worthy of envy for all of us ... It makes us exclaim: This is how the savage Fuegians die, civilized in the Salesian missions! ... Those Fuegians so hated and persecuted to death, as if they had been wild beasts! And by whom? ... From civilized people who claimed to be Christians!⁹⁵

Although condemning the violence committed against the Selk'nam, the missionaries stopped short of questioning the very nature of the colonization process that enabled such violence. Furthermore, missionary discourse understood extinction closely related to the continuity of the Selk'nams ways of life but not as a possible outcome of their own missionary efforts.

Conclusion

In 1939 the local historian Armando Braun Menéndez challenged the arguments that put the blame on the demise of the Selk'nam on the settlers:

Onas and Yaganes, for inscrutable physiological reasons, were fatally condemned to disappear. Their physical build was so miserable that they could not bear their own weather. Stories of persecution and victimhood at the hands of the white men is an exaggeration, most of the times ill-intentioned.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Maggiorino Borgatello, *Patagonia meridionale e terra del fuoco: memorie di un missionario nel cinquantenario delle missioni salesiane, spine, fiori e frutti* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1929), 290.

⁹⁶ Armando Braún Menéndez, *Pequeña Historia Fueguina*. (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores. [1939] 1950), 13.

The religious overtone of the remark ‘condemned to disappear’ invokes two features: first, that such an outcome was inevitable, and second, that this outcome was due to indigenous peoples themselves as far as condemnation points to a self-inflicted fate. But the genocide was not a natural event and responsibilities did exist. The complicity of authorities, outright killings, intertribal warfare as a consequence of forced displacements and epidemics led to a sustained demographic decline of the Selk’nam. Martinic calculates that by 1881, there were around 2000 Selk’nam in the Chilean side of the Island of Tierra del Fuego.⁹⁷ By 1920 no more than twenty could be found in Chilean territory.⁹⁸ In this process, the Selk’nam resisted by attacking miners, sheep farmers and soldiers and moving to distant regions, but this resistance cannot disguise the overwhelming forces that systematically destroyed them. What the settlers sought was land and the Selk’nam represented an obstacle to this end. Extinction discourse provided the ideological framework to this violent process. But despite the violence the Selk’nam did not disappear or become extinct.

This article has explored the relations between extinction discourse and settler violence. The contrasting depictions of the Selk’nam as savages, then capable of assimilation only to be savages again proves that they were only excuses for solving what was described as ‘the Indian problem’. Official reports, travel writing, letters, diaries, memoirs and missionary accounts provide a rich textual body that highlights how dominant discursive devices were operating as the settler colonialism unfolded. Discourses on extinction played an important role in naturalising the Selk’nam genocide while rendering the survivors

⁹⁷ Mateo Martinic, “Panorama de la Colonización en Tierra del Fuego entre 1891-1900,” *Anales del Instituto de la Patagonia* 4 no 1-3, (1973): 58.

⁹⁸ Mateo Martinic “Nueva Evidencia de la Presencia Selknam Tardía en la Tierra del Fuego,” *Magallania* 36, no 1. (2008): 37-41.

invisible. In the process, the appropriation of indigenous territories was never questioned. In these representations it is possible to discern how settler colonialism is a system of power that leads to and acts upon negative racial characterizations that dehumanizes indigenous peoples, justifies their territorial dispossession and reinforces social indifference to violence. Focusing on extinction discourse it is possible to appreciate the empirical relationship between ideology, dispossession, violence and genocide.

However, the social and cultural reproduction of ideas on extinction has not faded away. It has adopted new forms and still informs modern representations of indigenous peoples, whilst nourishing discriminatory practices, social indifference and racism. Explicit and implicit assumptions on the inevitable disappearance of indigenous peoples in the midst of a modern world remain a very powerful tool of oppression and territorial dispossession while contributing to the perpetuation of patterns of violence. Therefore, the unravelling of extinction discourse as a pervasive ideology is as important as the concrete efforts seeking the realization of indigenous rights. The significance of ideology in shaping social practices and vice versa plays and has played a major role in the historical struggles of indigenous peoples in relation to settler societies and nation states. To ignore these relations is to pave the way for prolonging social indifference to the violent patterns that threaten indigenous peoples worldwide. It is in this context where discussions on representations acquire their full meaning and urgency.