Unfinished extinction and the velocities of capitalist sacrifices in the woodlands of central Chile

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ABSTRACT

Through an exploration of the reconstruction process of the town of Santa Olga, which acquired nationwide relevance in Chile when it was destroyed by massive wildfires that occurred in 2017, in this paper we attempt to explain a paradox: that which totally destroys Santa Olga is precisely what ends up saving it. To do this, we first unravel the birth of the town to try to understand why, for its inhabitants, Santa Olga can be sacrificed. Then we describe the visibility that Santa Olga reached, thanks to its tragedy. Finally, we reflect on the way the velocity of disasters enables or limits the visibility of the sacrifices they convey, an interplay that ends with an unfinished extinction.

Extinção inacabada e a velocidade dos sacrifícios capitalistas nas florestas do Chile central

RESUMO

Através de uma exploração do processo de reconstrução de Santa Olga, que adquiriu relevância nacional no Chile quando foi destruída pelos grandes incêndios florestais ocorridos em 2017, neste artigo tentamos propor uma explicação para um paradoxo: o que destrói totalmente Santa Olga é precisamente o que acaba por salvá-la. Para fazer isso, primeiro tentamos desvendar a origem da Santa Olga a fim de entender por que, para seus habitantes, ela tem um caráter sacrificial. Em seguida, tentamos descrever vividamente a visibilidade que Santa Olga alcançou devido a sua tragédia. Finalmente, tentamos desenvolver nossa reflexão, focalizada na forma como a velocidade dos desastres permite ou não a visibilidade dos sacrifícios que eles implicam, em uma interação que culmina em uma extinção inacabada.

Extinción inacabada y las velocidades de los sacrificios capitalistas en los bosques de Chile central

RESUMEN

A través de una exploración del proceso de reconstrucción del pueblo de Santa Olga, que adquirió relevancia nacional en Chile...
1. Introduction

You could see this coming, but this is such a slow coming that you don’t see it … (Manuela Infante)\(^1\)

During the summer of 2017, central Chile was devastated by one of the country’s largest ever wildfires, affecting approximately 460,000 hectares of woodlands, mainly exotic plantations but also a number of native forests, killing 14 and leaving more than 8,300 people homeless (Barrera 2017; CONAF 2017; De la Barrera and Ruiz 2017; Michelett, Pacani, and Pisanti 2019). At its climax, the catastrophe included more than 500 simultaneous fires, which were boosted by unusually hot and dry weather conditions (Galilea 2019, 12). Right in the middle of the disaster lay a small town named Santa Olga, founded under the influence of the timber industry in the late 1960s. For several days, approximately 5000 inhabitants of the town lived in a dense cloud of smoke and ashes, indexes of surrounding fires that threatened to pounce on their homes. The tense situation lasted until an eviction order was made in the face of the coming catastrophe. Shortly after, and with an unprecedented voracity, the fire destroyed the entire town, leaving almost all of its inhabitants homeless (Michelett, Pacani, and Pisanti 2019). In a few hours, decades of effort and work became a pile of twisted iron and ashes, vividly materializing the helplessness that the people of Santa Olga stated they had experienced during the events. The magnitude of the catastrophe obliterated every trace of Santa Olga, although, simultaneously and paradoxically, it allowed it to be “really” noticeable for the very first time. When the entire village was nothing but ashes, it began to appear ubiquitously in the media, exposing the catastrophe to the rest of the Chilean society and mobilizing sympathetic mercy and all kinds of humanitarian aid. A contradiction thus manifested: the catastrophe had such magnitude that it completely destroyed a town, but simultaneously, and due to that same magnitude, it made that same town, on the verge of disappearance, visible for the first time. In the terms of Rancière (1996), when the disaster reached its climax, it allowed a previously nonexistent visibility, a reorganization of the sensible, and thus created the conditions of survival for the territory and its inhabitants.

In this paper, we aim to unravel this apparent contradiction to shed some light on the discussion addressed in this special issue, by exploring how the tragedy of Santa Olga

\(^1\)Extract from the play *Estado Vegetal*. The original quote is: “Esto se veía venir, lo que pasa es que es un venir tan relento que no se ve …”
might allow us to uncommon extinction, and the possibility of thinking about ends as processes that resist homogenization and tend toward unforeseen divergencies (de la Cadena 2017). With this purpose, we want to reflect on Santa Olga’s case as exemplary of a permanently unfinished extinction (sensu Di Giminiani and González Galvez 2018), an open-ended process characterized by a constitutive incompleteness. We think this approach is not only useful to consider the particularity of what happened in Santa Olga but also to reflect on the quotidian effects of different global forces of progress, which have proven to be a deadly threat (Tsing 2015) verging on a mass extinction like that which occurred 250 million years ago (Sepkoski 2020, 297; Gan et al. 2017, G4).

Thanks to the ethnographic fieldwork we have carried out during several visits in 2018 and 2019, throughout the process of reconstructing Santa Olga – in which we gathered data through participant observation and conducted 25 interviews with local leaders, entrepreneurs and other actors involved in the reconstruction process – we want to explore the tragedy that threatened to extinguish Santa Olga but ended up allowing it to be contingently saved. In doing so, we will propose that the wildfire produced a radical acceleration in a process of very slow but sure extinction that was already on course, and its occurrence provoked the provisional avoidance of the extinction, for humanitarian reasons triggered by the visibility Santa Olga reached, thanks to the catastrophe itself. In a sense, and as we will try to describe, for Santaolguinos the fires manifest that Santa Olga was, and has been, destined for sacrifice, but the eventual acceleration of this destiny – through the generation of a sacrificial climax – momentarily produced its salvation (Figure 1).

Two key discussions are useful to ethnographically understand the contradiction we have stated. The first surrounds the economic implications of Santa Olga’s birth and later destruction. In an area traditionally filled with native species, Santa Olga began to

Figure 1. Referential location of Santa Olga (Map by Hugo Ikehara).
change in the second half of the twentieth century with the arrival of logging interests, which started to plant exogenous species that completely changed the ecosystem by eroding lands and producing increasing environmental dryness and water scarcity. Soon after the timber industry arrived, dozens of agricultural workers looking for new job opportunities settled on lots of land granted by the company for that aim (Rojas 2017). This is how Santa Olga was born, a perfect example of what Haraway has labeled the Plantationocene, in which the extraction “depends on the relocation of the generative units: plants, animals, microbes, people” (Haraway et al. 2016, 557). Over the years the logging business began to flourish, and Santa Olga grew accordingly. In the meantime, a mutual dependency developed between both parties: the industry needed the people of Santa Olga to carry out its tasks, and the people of Santa Olga needed the industry to make a living, while the intensive exploitation produced by this encounter radically transformed the environment. As Tsing (2015) similarly describes for timber industries in Oregon, the same thing that promised economic growth became the main cause of environmental damage (cf. Reinert 2018, 603–604). This contradiction has been described elsewhere by Arsel, Pellegrini & Mena through the notion of “immiserizing growth,” showing how eventually what seems to be an open scenario of action is reduced to dependence, and thus the impacts of extractivism “can also be found in the way they crowd out other ways of envisioning and enacting development” (2019, 221; see also Acosta 2013, 65; Gudynas 2015, 58–62).

For various reasons, some previously mentioned and others that we address later, we think of Santa Olga as a sacrifice zone, an area that has “been offered up for exploitation in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement” (Hedges and Sacco 2012, XI; see also Klein 2012; Farrier 2019; Little 2017). Supposedly, initially coined to designate sites affected by nuclear activity, currently sacrifice zones are areas that are the “product of an unfettered global capitalism, and their sacrifice is driven primarily by profit-seeking” (Shade 2015, 776; cf. Colten 2012, 91–92). More importantly, they appear as areas “where everything and everyone is expendable” (Hedges and Sacco 2012, XII; see also Reinert 2018). Although this expendability was not evident to Santaolguinos before the fires, it became crystal clear for them during the catastrophe that destroyed their town. While it is possible to state that the establishment of the wood industry in the area was slowly leading it to devastation, via the intense exploitation of the local environment through the common logic of extractivism (Gudynas 2012, 2015), not many Santaolguinos would have agreed with such a stance before the summer of 2017. However, among many things, the fire was also an eye-opener. To them, the fire revealed

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1Ishikawa considers the Plantationocene as a category within the Anthropocene, characterized by intense and vast monocropping production. Similar to Haraway, he characterizes it as an era of social and ideological changes that take place when different and often distant landscapes, people and things come into contact. Such new encounters or spatial juxtapositions have led to temporal compression of succession – the transplanting and mobilization, proliferation, reduction and extirpation of plants, flora and people in a relatively short period of time. (2020, 592)

2Our use of the term mutual dependence instead of interdependence follows the characterization Stengers makes of Capitalism (2020).

3Acosta labels this as “the paradox of the plenty,” which occurs when communities surrounded by what have been constructed as “resources” are doomed to poverty by that very process of construction. This is particularly tragic in the case of communities whose resources appear to be “renewable” but, for the slow damage they produce, are in fact not, such as tree plantations (2013, 61–62).
that their town and its surroundings were nothing but “resources” (Gudynas 2015, 165–169) or, more specifically, “commodities” (Svampa 2013) that had, fundamentally, a primary economic role from an external point of view (Acosta 2013; Gudynas 2015). This revelation was evident inasmuch as the fire itself was overtly understood as a sacrifice. As one of the prominent leaders of the town would state emphatically each time the topic of the fire was on the table: “they let us burn, nobody helped us … they knew this was going to happen and nobody helped us.” This idea was also commonly shared by people during the process of reconstruction. The local theory states that there was a plague broadly affecting the trees surrounding Santa Olga, and the fire was an effective economic way of dealing with it, because plantations were insured. We do not want to judge this theory by its veracity, but we are interested in how it triggers, among Santaolguinos, the insight about the expendability of their lives. Thus, in a sense, the fire that destroyed Santa Olga evidences the sacrificial nature “saturated by violences […] that remain nameless, and therefore also largely invisible” (Reinert 2018, 598), that, unknowingly, the town always had. Later, indeed, the rubble after Santa Olga’s destruction was the flagrant evidence of a hidden history of violence and dispossession that was now patently revealed (Gordillo 2014, 258).

The second discussion we deem useful to understanding the contradiction addressed in this paper regards the notion of disaster itself. In Chile, there is an open debate concerning wildfire prevention policies, in a context where their greater occurrence is attributed to a modification of climatic conditions (Centro de Políticas Públicas UC 2018; González et al. 2011). At its core, this debate takes for granted that it is not possible to change climatic conditions, so policies should be focused on preventing fires as discrete events or emergencies triggered by direct anthropic intervention. This notion of disaster, as an extraordinary event, a break in normality or a suspension in the course of daily life (Barrios 2017a), is often the first that comes to mind when we think about tragic events like those lived by Santaolguinos, even though the definition of disaster has an increasingly polysemic character, considering the multiple processes that are interconnected in its occurrence (Oliver-Smith 1999). The disaster as such might be approached as the failure of a naturalistic (sensu Descola 2005) and anthropocentric project, in which trying to tame forces beyond its control finds permanent and unpredictable opposition. In the case of Santa Olga, this conceptualization of catastrophe is present among the inhabitants of the town themselves, who consider the wildfire that affected them as a milestone that marks an epochal change. This is based on the way it affected their lives and their belongings and fundamentally, as most of them recognize, because “it put them on the map.” As one local leader told us in one of our first visits to the area:

2017s wildfire is the most important event in Santa Olga’s history. It erased us from the map, it is the worst moment we have lived, but at the same time it is what made us exist … let me ask you something, had you heard about Santa Olga before we were set on fire? You had not, of course, nobody knew about our existence before, and nobody cared …

As we will see, and as Smith points out for the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 (2007, 88–91), the fire not only granted Santa Olga a historical narrative but by making it disappear it also made it visible, transforming it into an example of resilience.

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5We have translated all testimonies and sources quoted in this paper that were originally made or published in Spanish. We have changed the names or maintained the anonymity of testimonies throughout to protect the privacy of our interlocutors.
Traditionally, public policymaker perspectives on catastrophic events transform disasters into opportunities to introduce innovation and modifications, many of them deployed through reconstruction plans (Barrios 2017b; Klein 2012; Oliver-Smith 1996). This was clear for the tragedy of Santa Olga, as recognized by former undersecretary of public works, Sergio Galilea: “we wanted to create a new Santa Olga, making a city and houses of a standard not known up to that date in reconstructive processes, building an exemplary locality for future forest settlement” (2019, 26–27). This opportunistic approach might be read through what Naomi Klein labels a “state of shock,” taken as an opportunity by corporate interests to accomplish their aims (2012), but it has also been analyzed through a focus on communities’ resilient and adaptative capacities (Oliver-Smith 1996). In these senses, a part of the official narrative after the already mentioned Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was to rebuild Chicago from ashes (Smith 2007), with similar debate for the reconstruction plans of New Orleans after Katrina (Barrios 2017b; Klein 2012).

We are not necessarily against considering disasters as events, but we think that the very notion of event needs to be opened ethnographically. Following Meinert and Kapferer (2015), we think of events as both a portal toward a better understanding of the relations composing a given phenomenon and, simultaneously, as a moment of indeterminacy that actualizes potentialities that were present in the context before the event actually occurred. The event is thus twofold: it is a milestone as an opportunity for intervention, but it is also a portal toward the forces contributing to the event itself and their possible actualizations. We thus observe the event, but as a network of disastrous constituents that are made visible contingently, in order to follow that network and partially describe it. In doing so, we attempt to avoid cutting the network by introducing any categorical divisions such as those that detach extraordinary events from ordinary temporality (Strathern 1996). When approaching the disastrous events as described, we are thus adopting a stance akin to what Scott Knowles labels “Slow disasters,” considering them as long-term processes linked across time. The slow disaster stretches both back in time and forward across generations to indeterminate points, punctuated by moments we have traditionally conceptualized as “disaster,” but in fact claim much more life, health, and wealth across time than is generally calculated. (2020, 197)

In this paper, by understanding the context that gave birth to Santa Olga and opening the notion of disaster as an event, both as an emergency but also through the consideration of the slowness it conveys, we want to propose an interplay of velocities that are produced by the event as a milestone. The disaster allows a radical acceleration that paradoxically generates salvation, or the contingent avoidance of disappearance, for humanitarian reasons triggered by media visibility. Later, and as part of an open call to problematize the severe danger of a coming mass extinction, we discuss how that extinction is engulfed by Capitalism, and specifically how Capitalism creates it, and at the same time proposes its solution, by changing our constitutive interdependence to networks of dependence (Stengers 2020). As follows, we will first reflect ethnographically on the ambiguous status of an event that granted survival only by maximizing sacrifice, making extinction unfinished. Later, we return to these materials in order to put forward our speculative understanding of this guiding contradiction.
2. A capitalist sacrifice

Santa Olga literally owes its existence to the timber industry. According to the local memory, the town began to be built due to a donation of several lots of land from a sawmill to its employees, so they could establish themselves along with their families. Over time, the timber business continued to grow, and the town of Santa Olga developed, as pine and eucalyptus trees began to populate most of the land in the area, reaching around 5000 inhabitants at the time of the 2017 fire. The timber industry\(^6\) played a fundamental role in this growth, not only as a labor source but also through providing people with basic services, such as electricity. The industry and the people of Santa Olga have thus built a complementary dependence over time, which people in the town understood in terms of trust and loyalty. On one side, Santaolguinos made their best effort to make plantations produce while, on the other, the industry gave its employees the necessary amenities for them to live in a relatively comfortable way. However, this relation would have been betrayed at the least opportune moment: the 26th of January of 2017, when the entire town was razed by a huge wave of fire. For people in Santa Olga, the practical dimension of this betrayal manifested in the absence of assistance from the industry during the catastrophe, which is understood as providing definitive insight into the role they actually played in the area. This has been overtly raised by the vast majority of people in Santa Olga, at least since we began fieldwork there in July 2018. As Juana, a local leader, said: “They did nothing to stop the fire … the company didn’t help us … we don’t know why they behave in that way … they were part of us, here we all lived together …”

The explanation for this sacrificial attitude toward the town and inhabitants, which seems odd at first, is to be found in the poor management of a pest control action against a plague that threatened to render most plantations unusable. Francisca, a woman in her forties who had lived all her life in Santa Olga, explained this situation to us as follows:

… there was a pest in the pine trees that didn’t let them export the wood … there were some black bugs, that attacked people … I got attacked by them, they bit me, but I never saw them … A friend of mine, who worked on the plantations, told me, when he was drunk [implying he was telling the truth], that the company was going to perform a controlled burn, but eventually they weren’t able to control it …

Julia, one of the eldest women in town, told us something similar:

We all know that the fire was intentionally caused by the company … they had a plague that summer, and we realized it because there were some bugs, some bugs that looked like lady-bugs, but black with orange stains … and they bit, and the bite hurt … we saw them that summer … To get rid of this plague they decided to burn up their forests, and eventually they could collect the money from their insurance … they don’t lose anything, they are a big company and they also didn’t care about losing Santa Olga …

The reason for the fire seems pretty clear for most people in Santa Olga, and there is even less doubt regarding the explicit assertion that the town was intentionally burned. From our perspective, there are two main reasons that enable this certainty. First, there would

\(^6\)When talking about the industry we do not specify which particular industry we are referring to for two reasons. Firstly, we are respecting the desires of some of our interlocutors to keep names anonymous; and secondly, we think the process we are describing is not particular to Santa Olga and the specific industry located in its surroundings.
be multiple indexes that would evidence not only the intentionality of fire but also its careful planning. People in Santa Olga state that the fire would have started as several isolated foci that ended up joining to create a vast massacre. More specifically, Santaolguinos state that they saw people lighting fires in the hills during the night, shadows that quickly and repeatedly ignited flames, to later disappear in the darkness. Others point out that, while desperately attempting to extinguish the fire, they found several plastic bottles used to transport kerosene, barrels used to store gasoline, and flammable tapes arranged in the specific ways in which the fire would have started. As Soraya, one of the leaders of the *allegados*\(^7\) told us:

In those days we also saw how a red airplane approached, throwing a red dust that fueled the fire ... it was a fuel, or I don't know, but fire appeared and increased in places where they threw that dust ... afterwards people saw empty barrels of gasoline ... what does an empty barrel of gasoline do in the middle of the woods?! 

The second reason that would allow for noticing the intentionality of the fire is the above-mentioned inaction of the company, which adds to deficient State procedures to protect the population. According to Santaolguinos, the state failed to supervise the preventive measures that the companies had to take, especially in relation to the populations that lived in the vicinity of the plantations. Confronted by the uncontrolled fire, the company no longer played the role of replacing the State, as it had done several times previously. This time it would have left Santaolguinos alone, ignoring the danger they were in. María, a woman in her fifties from Santa Olga, contrasted the role of the company during the reconstruction by stating:

... the company didn't help us, they were worried to save their machines and not about putting out the fire ... and now they come, they put money for the stadium, they gave us little trees [arbolitos], but at that time they did nothing ... I think all people want to know why they let us burn, why nobody came to help us, why we were left alone ...

The most vivid example of this argument, which we have ethnographically understood through the production of abandonment, the sensation of feeling totally left to their fate of death and devastation, is a situation that took place one day before the emergency, while most people were on a pedestrian walkway on the road between the city of Talca and Constitución. People had gathered there anxiously and hopefully awaiting the arrival of the Supertanker, an American Boeing 747 prepared for wildfire fighting that had been hired by the Chilean wife of one of Walmart's heirs to help fight the catastrophe, and which enjoyed unusual media attention during the time of the disaster. The words of Pedro, one of the few men involved in the civil organizations of Santa Olga, summarize what most people felt and realized during that afternoon:

... everybody was on the pedestrian way, waiting for the little airplane [avioncito]. Where is the plane coming from?, where is the plane coming from? They were constantly saying ... and suddenly, the plane, which was destined for Santa Olga, is diverted to Vichuquén ... We were all shocked ... We were all helpless ... And what can you find in Vichuquén? The summer houses of politicians, businessmen, the elite. They obviously had to save Vichuquén ... Compared to Vichuquén, what was Santa Olga? Nothing ...

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\(^7\)In Chile this is a common term to refer to people who do not own a house and have to live in the homes of friends or close relatives. On *allegados*’ political organization for the right to housing, see Pérez (2018).
3. The survival of the most noticeable

The story of the truncated arrival of the Supertanker encapsulates an important part of what we found in our ethnographic approach to Santa Olga: when the sacrificial disaster reached an incommensurable magnitude, what is affected by it is made visible and acquires a renewed existence. In other words, by being on the brink of the most heinous destruction, Santa Olga can survive. As previously stated, we believe that this could be understood as an acceleration in the velocities of sacrifice that affected Santa Olga: from being affected by the slowness of the logging activity, and the side effects of pine tree monocropping, suddenly and unpredictably they were affected by the speediness of a voracious fire that threatened their lives while supposedly reducing economic losses. In the meantime, and due to change in sacrificial velocity, what is being sacrificed passes from being unnoticed to acquiring radical visibility, becoming the symbol of the catastrophe and its pain. In our view, this interplay of sacrificial velocities needs to be understood as embedded in Capitalism and the replacement it performs of interdependence with chains of dependence (Stengers 2020). In this case, the replacement is particularly tragic, insofar as the disaster is engulfed by the logic of dependence itself, and it is this logic that keeps the potential extinction of Santa Olga always unfinished (cf. Arsel, Pellegrini, and Mena 2019). The renewed existence of Santa Olga, marked by nationwide fame, might be summarized through the story of the town’s new high school inauguration, which we review next.

October 3, 2018, 11:00 AM. Dozens of people, volunteers of Desafío Levantemos Chile (an NGO dedicated to reconstruction after the occurrence of disasters), parents of high school students and local government officials move frantically to refine the last preparations for the inauguration ceremony of Santa Olga’s new high school. Meanwhile, curious people and different press media started to gather outside the building. When the crowd totaled about one hundred, a helicopter became visible in the distance, and as it approached the bets began on which media personality would arrive in it. “There comes Rafa Araneda,” a famous Chilean TV presenter, was heard amongst those gathered and word began to spread. When everything was set for the ceremony, they let the crowd into the school, which was decorated with numerous pennants and garlands and had men with stilts delivering gifts to the children and lively music. Among those assembled was the central group of neighborhood leaders of Santa Olga, who were constantly interrupted as they walked by the numerous media representatives attending the celebration, who wanted to hear about their feelings and impressions of the event. The neighborhood leaders were all dressed in outfits chosen specially for the occasion. Taking advantage of the spotlight, María, the principal leader, demanded that along with the high school building the government should make progress in the reconstruction of their houses and the recovery of the timber industry, which was the heart of economic activity in the area. “This is a breakthrough, but much remains to be done to finish the reconstruction of our town,” she emphasized (Figure 2).

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8 It is possible to think of this as a disruption in an environmental infrastructure (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017) that occurs in the continuity of being it embodies, remaking in multiple and unforeseen ways worlds that are simultaneously material and semiotic (see also Bonelli and González Gálvez 2018).

9 According to Galilea, the continuous attention on this tragedy was unprecedented in a country that is permanently affected by disasters (2019, 38).
After a few minutes the ceremony began, on a specially prepared stage surrounded by giant screens. From the center, a man greeted those present:

Welcome! How are the people of Santa Olga? How are the people of Los Aromos? We are very, very excited … We feel a lot of love, a lot of pride … we have worked very hard in coordination with the municipality, with our donors, with the whole educational community, and for us this is a celebration, but above all a party for you …

He then listed each of the personalities that had arrived for the occasion, most of whom, as the same neighbors pointed out, “had no idea of the existence of the town before it burned.” The mayor of Constitución, the national head of the government office for reconstruction, the governor of Talca, the regional secretary of education, each one of the leaders of the associations of neighbors, the director of a nationwide humanitarian aid foundation, managers and presidents of different financial institutions, the owner of a local concrete company, the local manager of a major hardware store, and the president of a timber company that is the direct competitor of the company that worked in Santa Olga until the day of the fire. At the end of all the greetings and thanks, the announcer invited the audience to stand up to sing the national anthem.

After the anthem, the presenter continued for several minutes thanking each of the people and institutions that he had already mentioned, emphasizing every so often that the “true heroes” were the people of Santa Olga, for having faced the greatest catastrophe and having fought for their lives and their town. After each mention, there was a thunderous applause that the Santa Olga people gave to themselves, accompanied by general praise from the new visitors. Finally, it was time to present Rafa Araneda, who came to the stage in the middle of a great ovation. “You know better than anyone what happened here, you better than anyone know what you have to live through …” he began saying, and continued in the same tone for a few minutes. He then conducted
a quick ribbon-cutting ceremony, and after that returned quickly to the helicopter he had arrived on. Everything was broadcast live nationwide on the morning TV show that Rafa Araneda hosted at that time. In the same way, the different personalities who had arrived for the event began to leave, except for the local leaders, who had yet to discuss some pending issues that were unimaginable a couple of years earlier. “Well, I already gave two interviews this week, now someone else has to appear,” pointed out Maria, while the rest argued about who would take the post.

4. Expendability and unfinished extinction

The new media status acquired by local leaders in Santa Olga epitomizes the transformation suffered by the town immediately after the fire, and in the following months. Researchers have studied the impact media attention has in the way disasters are administered, by making them publicly known and activating different forms of aid, or by omitting them, which often results in turning them into what Ravi Rajan calls “chronic disasters,” whose effects are normalized and routinized (1999, 268; see also Button 1999). Why are there disasters that attract the full attention of the media, and thus of governments and civil society in general, while others go completely unnoticed? Why was Santa Olga invisible before, even though it embodied numerous environmentally harmful practices taken as “externalities” of forestry extractivism (Gudynas 2012), and acquired maximum visibility when it was burned out, as if the intensity of flames granted it unavoidable luminosity?

Considering that we, like the Santaolguinos, think of Santa Olga as an area allowed to be sacrificed, “in which the only valued life was that of the commodity” (Farrier 2019, 54), the main difference between the moments of Santa Olga’s history and visibility relates to the speed with which the expendability (Hedges and Sacco 2012) of the town is actualized, and through which what makes it up is finally sacrificed. Forestry extractivism slowly transforms the environment and the lives of people in Santa Olga, so slowly that it was prima facie imperceptible for everybody, including national media and Santaolguinos themselves. Furthermore, those aware of the transformations considered them a small price to pay for the sake of the economic benefits the timber activity brought. When the fire was unleashed to supposedly speed up sacrifice, according to the local theories of the catastrophe, the promptness with which it destroyed everything guaranteed its visibility, generating a wider reaction to a sudden emergency. Through this process of exhibition, the sacrifice of Santa Olga is engulfed by Capitalism through the emergence of what Fassin labels as “humanitarian reason,” a practical contraposition to the expendability of lives by reasserting equal dignity of human beings (2012, 253) that, paradoxically, emerges by differentiating lives and “exposing intimate details of pain” (2012, 250) of those asymmetrically defined as more vulnerable.

The understanding of sacrifice zones that we are proposing, one that sheds light on the “dark side” of environmental infrastructures (Velho and Ureta 2019), allows us to broaden the usual usage of the term by going beyond the apparent side effects of economic activity (see Little 2017; Reinert 2018). Indeed, it allows us to consider processes of “immiserizing growth” that submit local communities to unescapable fates, at the same time taking away their autonomy (Arsel, Pellegrini, and Mena 2019), while also including processes of radical objectivation of beings (Acosta 2013; Gudynas 2015) and how they affect the worlds they intervene in (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017). Sacrifice zones would thus
be related, more generally, to expendability, objectification, commodification, and hence to the replacement of interdependence with “chains of dependence” (Stengers 2020). As Stengers puts it, this transformation implies a moral shift from a framework of collaboration, which acknowledges the common constitution of all existing entities, to a hierarchical “chain of command” that “renders dependence irreversible” (2020). The difference between Santa Olga’s two sacrificial stages is framed by this stark dependence, which objectifies living entities as mere valuables, resources or commodities (Svampa 2013). Indeed, as Farrier points out, it implies “the reduction of all life into the categories of resource or waste” (2019, 52). The character of these relations is also revealed when we approach the shift of sacrificial velocities as an event (Meinert and Kapferer 2015), insofar as it makes evident the asymmetric nature of the links composing Santa Olga, and simultaneously it allows the emergency of an unforeseen possibility based on that same asymmetry: Santa Olga was not doomed to disappear, but through the very relations constituting it, it was in a process of unfinished extinction.

When talking about unfinished extinction, we want to portray a process of exploitation that is produced through the interplay of the velocities of sacrifices lived in Santa Olga, which might be compared to the “humanitarian reason” described by Fassin (2012) as exposing vulnerable lives before later advocating for their dignity and denouncing their vulnerability. Santa Olga’s unfinished extinction is, thus, a form of capitalist sacrifice that is never fully consummated because the very same chains of dependence that shape its tragedy are also activated as humanitarian aid when the town is razed by fire. Therefore, its destruction and its salvation would be different threads from the same fabric.

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