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Ways of Not-Knowing in Neoliberal Chile
Notes Towards a Dark Anthropology

Abstract: Through two significantly distinct ethnographic case studies, both based in Santiago, Chile, we argue for the need to attend to experiences which are not conceptualised by our interlocutors, or that remain ‘dark’ in terms of their ontological and representational properties. We point out that anthropology has been ill-equipped to deal with these ineffable margins, and point to conceptual arches which could be used transversally in what we call a ‘dark anthropology’. The two fields in question here are the ufological ‘absurd’ and early mothering experiences among low-income communities. What both have in common is that they defy anthropological figure-ground logics, where experiences are explained via their social contexts. We argue for an anthropology that can come to grips with non-linear, sometimes dark, socialities.

Keywords: ineffable, mothering, negative theology, paradox, ufology

Is it possible to do an anthropology of the ineffable from the perspective of what is not said, not communicated, or what remains essentially in the dark? What happens when our interlocutors themselves reach this impasse? What remains for anthropological thought? We define the ineffable here as that which is beyond discursive or categorical experience, but which has grounding in perceptual and bodily processes nonetheless. The ineffable in this text is not the spiritual, or transcendent, necessarily. It is the acategorical: that which does not fit into rational models of explanation or even religious rationalisations, which is not accessible. It is the apophatic, unspeakable, in theological terms, but that can have physical symptoms nevertheless. Through two radically different case studies based in Chile – ufology and mothering among low-income communities – we will argue that it is possible to delineate the conceptual tools to describe what Roy Wagner argues as the ‘third way’ or ‘dimensionless point’ (2010: 165), and that these can be transversally applicable. The radical separateness of these examples is evidence for the need to develop a dark anthropology that can serve more than one field.

Anthropology has not dealt especially well with states of not-knowing, be these manifest as the peripheral, incomplete, unsaid, elusive or simply opaque (Martínez et al 2021). One way to understand these is as cultural ‘others’. The
‘exceptions’, or ‘matters out of place’ (Douglas 1966), tend to be seen in relation to the dominant centre. Even if, as James Boon argues, citing her famous example of the pangolin – it is scaly like a fish but it climbs trees! – Mary Douglas too easily polarises centre and border (1999: 235). There tends to be room for uncertainty, doubt or paradox in conceptual exegesis only as a privative, as something missing on the way to a hypothetically more complete picture, culture or life. As Nigel Rapport argues, it has been ‘commonplace in anthropology since Evans-Pritchard that one anticipates ethnographic subjects – including anthropologists themselves – as having their rationalities circumscribed by, indeed defined by, the discursive opportunities made available to them by a “culture”’. This is a moral system, not a natural one, he adds (2015: 256).

But the unsayable or inconceivable here is not locatable as some ‘other’ to a normative culture. We posit that there are other ways to pose the ‘dark’ in our ethnographic examples, that do not reduce these to rejections or negations of normative ideologies, but that perhaps embrace paradox itself as the central force of manifestation. As Martínez et al say, ‘peripheral wisdom is not about some other, subversive knowledge’ (2021: 4). We need to find ways of resisting the urge to ‘extract meaning and assemble fragments into a whole’ (2021: 4). This is of course a methodological point. Not-knowing here, for the researcher, is generative of investigative innovation. But this is not just what we wish to explore here. In his Foreword to Martínez et al’s edited book Peripheral Methodologies, Paul Stoller provides a description of one of his friends whose life is filled with what John Keats calls ‘negative capability’ (2021: x). In the place where Adamu Jenitongo lives, one brutally confronts the limits of comprehension. Stoller tells us of one experience, of ‘not-knowing-your-backside-from-your-frontside’, when he was awoken in the middle of the night at Jenitongo’s house by high-pitched screeching. Stoller’s response to this, to his own encounter with non-knowledge as an anthropologist, is to remain between art and ethnography, to evoke the ‘remedy of art’ (2021: xi) – to tell a good story while acknowledging ‘not knowing, unlearning, and the absence of knowledge’ (2021: xiii).

It is not a coincidence that the authors of this book’s chapters all work in ethnographic areas where explanation as such holds limited value – such as art, weaving, theatre; where invisibilities, rather than visibilities are the order of the day, and where ‘analytical labour’ appears to rob the field its ‘realness’ (Stoller 2021: 170; for a discussion on mobile representation in history of art, see Didi-Huberman 2009). The ‘Real’, Mattijas Van de Port says in relation to spirit possession in Brazilian Candomblé, quoting Žižek, is ‘something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature (1989: 169, in Van de Port 2005: 155). The Real is paradoxical to the extreme; it disappears as soon as we represent it; it is exterior to all symbolisation (2015: 168–169). But anthropology is grounded in a particular sort of subjectivity, one that is constituted via a humanistic individualised and interior moral consciousness. Consequently, knowledge is acquired by abstract-
ing from the materiality of the world the intellectual generalities that make sense of it or the physical and metaphysical forms that animate it. Tim Ingold has called this tendency ‘the logic of inversion’. ‘Through inversion’, he argues, ‘the field of involvement in the world, of a thing or person, is converted into an interior schema of which its manifest appearance and behaviour are but outward expressions’ (2006: 11).

It is commonplace in anthropology, then, for ontological differences to be transmuted into epistemological ones (Goslinga 2013; see also Abramson and Holbraad 2012), so that tales of gods, demons, spirits, witchcraft or ineffable experiences with UFOs become ‘idioms’, whether of the deep mind and its affective structures, or of the socio-historical, political or medical sphere. This transmutation is part and parcel of what has been a history of anthropological mediation – from alterity to reality, from strange to contextualised, from difference to sameness (Argyrou 2002). One interesting approach to this transmutation is Ingold’s forceful critique of what he calls Descola’s ‘relative universalism’ in his Beyond Nature and Culture (2016: 303), where he posits the four ontologies that he claims exist. As one of the reviewers of this article has forwarded, this critique, consisting in the notion that Descola in effect uses naturalism as a frame for comparative analysis for all the ontologies he proposes, goes directly to a denial of not-knowing, and to a translation of ontology into epistemology (for a response see Descola 2016). However, while Ingold famously accounts for how selves, entities, souls, or other forms become, rather than being predetermined, bringing with it an important notion of the ‘tacit’, he does not explicitly deal with the not-known or the ineffable as such.

The cases we draw on here defy the anthropological figure-ground logics Ingold criticises in Descola, because they are singular experiences of the ineffable, or rather, the non-representable, sometimes, the not-known. They do not mediate a culture, or a context, or even themselves. They present no apparent ethnographic fodder, so to speak, because they barely exist for our interlocutors, at least in conceptual, finished form. As ethnographers and anthropologists we thus also reach a mediational impasse. In this case, we can ask, perhaps following Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark (2014): what is mediation (anthropology) of what cannot be mediated, or communicated? The selves in these circumstances, to borrow Galloway et al’s words, communicate with a ‘radically contingent real’ (2014: 18), where, if in the first of our case studies, the real ‘obviates the human entirely and communicates more or less autonomously within and across itself’ (2014: 18), in the second, the alternative real traverses the most ordinary of circumstances, becoming invisible to itself. The first ethnographic case will examine admittedly ‘absurd’ encounters on the part of ufologists in Chile. These encounters are beyond the sightings of objects, or even contact with the pilots of the UFOs or abductions. They are understood by their experiencers as intensely baffling and out of the logical continuum. The second case study will deal with conceptual obfuscation in relation to malestar, malaise,
or sudden bouts of illness or depression among low-income women in Santiago, the capital. What is not known in the first case can become stark, paradoxically nonsensical; in the second, it dissolves into normative gender structures of life that are at once patriarchal and oppressive, and importantly, invisible. A woman learns to live with the malaise, but cannot ‘unpack’ it, or describe it. It thus becomes a dark space; it is non-knowledge.

Not-knowing takes different characters in each space. In the first case, the experience of the absurd can lead to a semantic ineffability – the lack of tools to express something. John Spackman describes this as meaning that an experience or an item of knowledge ‘is not captured by the meaning of any words’ (2012: 304). This is different from communicative ineffability, by which the seemingly ineffable cannot be conveyed to others by means of words (2012: 304), which is actually closer to the second example. This second case brings us to an analysis of the paradoxes and silences of neoliberalism itself (see Han 2012). Further, the ‘dark’ in both cases remits us to a critique of the often totalising role of ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowing’ in anthropology, bringing us towards a stance that can absorb ambiguities and inconsistencies. In this article we argue against the ontological idealism that permeates anthropology, implicitly or otherwise.

The Ufological Absurd

In 1978, there was a rally, a 39-day car race of over 28,000 km that went around South America, passing through Chile: the Vuelta a Sudamerica. Two Chilean drivers in particular are of interest, Carlos Acevedo and Hugo Prambs, who were competing in a Citroën GS. The race began in Buenos Aires, passing through Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and back to Argentina. On 16 September, Prambs abandoned the race for personal reasons and was replaced by Miguel Angel Moya, a mechanic, as the navigator and co-driver. On 23 September, the new pair were on their way to Bahia Blanca, in Argentina, on the final stretch of the race, its last 1,000 km. Acevedo was driving. At two in the morning, they stopped at a gas station, in Viedma, filled the tank and had a coffee. At three in the morning, just as they had crossed the town of Carmen de Patagones, the drivers spotted an intense light, heading in their direction at immense speed. They pulled over towards the curb, to let what they thought was a car with a more powerful engine go by. All of a sudden the car filled with a very intense yellow light, making it impossible for them to see anything except the bonnet of their car. Acevedo, in his post-incident interview, said that he looked out the window at that moment and saw that their car was about two metres from the ground. Thinking that they had hit a hump in the road and were flying through the air, he braced for impact. But instead, they kept on climbing. Then, they both felt a jolt and the car was back on the ground. They saw how the light that had illuminated the interior of their vehicle displaced itself and trav-
elled to a field, where it promptly disappeared. Acevedo says that he remembers the totality of this strange event to have lasted only about two minutes.

Now on the ground, they found that they were on the wrong side of the road, against traffic, totally stopped. They went on their way, but were overwhelmed to find that the next gas station they pulled into in the town of Pedro Luro was 123 kilometres from the town where they last remembered having passed, a few minutes earlier – Carmen de Patagones. In fact, more than two and a half hours had passed, not just two minutes. Furthermore, the gas tank they had filled in Viedma was now empty. They were now very close to the actual finish line. They would come in first if they continued. So puzzled were they by this sudden advantage that they headed to the nearest police station. According to well-known and media-savvy ufologist, Chilean Rodrigo Fuenzalida, who alerted Espírito Santo to this case, the overt meaning of this – the win – is so bereft of signification that it becomes absurd.

This section examines not-knowing in ufological Chile by way of encounters with the ‘absurd’, ones that bring conceptual meltdown for experiencers and investigators who work within an evidence paradigm. Like many groups at the fringes of scientific and public respectability, Chilean ufology is for the most part staunchly empiricist, positivist even. Evidence is the threshold concept, be it in the form of videos of UFOs, or photographs and other forms of verification. Diana Pasulka (2019) and others have called this materialist approach the ‘nuts and bolts’ variety. The absurd, of course, presents itself as illogical precisely because it is arepresentational – it falls nowhere on the evidence scale. While in Chile, in contrast to much of the world, there is a government-backed entity connected to the airforce (Committee for the Study of Anomalous Aerial Phenomena), which claims to trace the causes and explanations of anomalous aerial events, such as sightings, it has little repercussion in the wider ufological or scientific communities. On the one hand, the media has been sharp in its exploration of potential sensational cases. The invited ufologists on these shows tend to play sceptics to the public’s credulity. On the other, as ‘realist institutions’, modern governments cannot even ask the scientific question about the reality of UFOs. As Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall explain in a paper on anthropocentric sovereignty, ufology ‘is decried as a pseudo-science that threatens the foundations of scientific authority, and the few scientists who have taken a public interest in UFOs have done so at considerable cost’ (2008: 610). It is for this reason that ‘absurd’ experiences stand out like a sore thumb: by definition they contravene the notion that evidence demonstrates something of an independent material reality, a reality ‘out there’.

‘Absurd’ alien-related phenomena can be seen in the experiences of Carlos, a ufologist in southern Chile, who once chased a flying saucer to some fields in Tierra del Fuego, only to watch it fold up like a piece of paper and dart upwards. The camera with which Carlos had come failed to even capture this floating sphere, which was flanked by two phosphorescent orbs. Subsequent to this, he
and his partner were stalked by a driverless car that appeared from nowhere and then disappeared. As the mysterious car drove past theirs, their vehicle engine turned on by itself and the needles on the dashboard went ‘all crazy’. These are not half-understood experiences, as Susan Lepselter has explained in relation to the ‘uncanny landscape’ of ufology in the United States (2016: 43). There is something matter-of-fact about these occurrences that stems from their complete unexpectedness and breakage with normalcy for those involved. We suggest paradox as a conceptual tool with which to frame these – not because the event is composed of self-contradictory statements, but because of its self-reflexive characteristics, of its tendency to question itself via its own form. Illusions and paradoxes force us to reflect on the rules by which they are observed.

Some events are so ‘absurd’ that they become, and draw from, representation, that is, popular culture, films even: the ultimate theatre. Mario, a ufologist in Santiago, says that a few years ago he got a call from a hairdresser friend of his, reporting something very strange. She was a passenger in a car driven by her husband when, at the corner of Macul and Quilín in Santiago, she looked up and saw a massive ‘Independence Day’ spaceship right over them. ‘It was like the National Stadium, huge’, she told him. But it was exactly like the craft in the movie. They stopped the car and got out, looking up, but it was gone. Another friend told him the exact same thing: that she had seen the ‘Independence Day’ flying saucer in Pedro de Valdivia, also in Santiago. The ‘absurdity’ of these events arguably comes not from witnessing a UFO in plain sight, in the middle of the day, but from witnessing an Independence Day spacecraft, which would be a perfect, culturally envisioned alien object. Let us take a closer look at this example.

For one, we could analyse this episode – the two sightings – in the negative. The Independence Day ship might as well be saying, I am not an Independence Day ship. To understand this, take Michel Foucault’s 1968 analysis of Magritte’s paintings ‘Ceci n’est pas un pipe’ (‘This is not a Pipe) from 1929 and ‘Les Deux Mystéres’ (‘The Two Mysteries’) from 1966, as argued by Petra Carlsson (2013). Foucault describes the first painting as a carefully drawn pipe and underneath it a note saying, ‘This is not a pipe’ (Carlsson 2013: 66). Carlsson notes that Foucault argues that this image has a way of disrupting the economy of representation. The image of the pipe is very clear, so clear that it would be ridiculous to say otherwise; but a painting is never its object, it is a reality unto itself, not a copy of a model (2013: 66). The empty space, Foucault says, between the image and the words are what question the power of representation, of classification (2008: 27, in Carlsson 2013: 67). ‘It refuses to play by the rules of resemblance’, says Carlsson (2013: 67). The second painting is even more evocative in its absurdity. Foucault says that

It’s the same pipe, the same handwriting. But instead of being juxtaposed in a neutral, limitless unspecified space, the text and the figure are set within a frame. The frame itself is placed upon an easel, and the latter in turn upon the clearly
visible slats of the floor. Above everything, a pipe is exactly like the one in the picture, but much larger. (Foucault 2008: 15, in Carlsson 2013: 67)

If you have a teacher explaining this painting, Foucault says, they would have to go through many levels of negation, ‘the ever multiplying ways in which “this is not a pipe”’ (2013: 67). The painting seems to make meaning impossible. Magritte, according to Foucault, has managed to make resemblance and illustration disappear within a piece of resemblance and illustration (2008: 30, in Carlsson, 2013: 69). According to Carlsson, there is a ‘profound nonsense’ to an ‘elevated account of meaning and meaningfulness’ (2013: 69). The Independence Day spacecraft appears to point to the idea that ‘representation and analogy are made objects of their own absurdity’, and with this, argues Carlsson, ‘the possibility of a meaningful positive/affirmative language disappears also’ (2013: 72).

For some observers and theoreticians of alien phenomena, the ‘absurd’ has always been a constitutive component of a kind of meta-ufology itself that questions the materialist premises of ufology. According to Sergio Sánchez, a Chilean writer and sceptic, some of the classic ufologists are keen exponents of what some have called the ‘great trickster’ – the idea that there is some superhuman form of consciousness which generates forms, according to our cultural ideals, and ‘plays’ us with riddles and absurdities (pers. comm. 2020). The alien is not necessarily present, at least in the form we think. Nevertheless the interface or contact-point between ‘them’ and ‘us’ can prove ineffable, or indeed absurd. It is like Jacques Vallée’s (1982 [1969]) example of the Wisconsin farmer who sees a UFO land on his field, and when he looked inside there were a couple of small alien creatures making pancakes, which they then offer him. Or take the case of the Winchester councillor in the UK, who, on his way home, was stopped by a female alien in a ballet tutu and slippers. In the ‘absurd’ framework, what are observed are not simply advanced ‘machines’ with ‘nuts and bolts’ characteristics, mechanistically flying at high speeds with humanoid occupants. The absurd stops short of these characteristics; it does not negate them, but it does nothing to support them. In a book with American contactee Whitley Strieber, Jeffrey Kripal understands the latter as suggesting that we ‘abandon the terms of “the false either/or debate” that has taken place so far’ (Strieber and Kripal 2016: 41), where either there are aliens or ‘it’s all rubbish’ (2016: 41). Kripal posits a third way of knowing, by which he means that events are both real and not real, both physical and mental at once. He calls this ‘the paradoxical practice’ of hermeneutics (2016: 116). We would perhaps do well to capture this technique for a ‘dark anthropology’. It involves looking at a particular ethnography from the lens of paradox itself. This means taking a cue again from Kripal (2019: 145), understanding people’s experience of the anomalous or ecstatic or bizarre events as not expressed in the dialectical logic of either/or, but of both/and or neither/nor. As Vallée (1982 [1969]) might put it, there is a ‘meta-logic’ in absurd experiences that is utterly incommunicable and highly personal, as if constructed for or by the
person in question. Further, absurd experiences are not repeatable, making them more paradoxical still.

**New Mothers and the Non-Conceptual**

This second case study brings a notion of the ineffable to centre stage in people’s ordinary, daily and illness experiences. Based on work with young women, mainly first-time mothers in low-income neighbourhoods in Santiago, the research contemplates the experience of *malestar*, malaise, with regards to non-conceptual forms of experiencing early motherhood throughout this time frame. During the first year, these new mothers suffer from something indescribable, non-conceptualised and unclassifiable. Unless it is pathologised, medicated as post-partum depression, for instance, it is not recognised or objectified. There is no socialisation of *malestar* – while it is thought about, there are no direct concepts to describe it, or even think through it. Rather, it exists at the margins of affective and phenomenological experience, one with a pre-conscious dimension. It is a feeling of ‘I don’t know what’s happening to me’. These nominal, yet powerful feelings of ineffability in one’s body are not part of the vocabulary of low-income mothers in Chile. This lack of recognition deprives the experiences of the words to describe them, to make worlds according to precepts. Rather, this malaise is managed and normalised through strategies of silencing, and even guilt-induction. Some women come to understand themselves as ‘bad mothers’ for their indulgence in attempting to grapple with these fragmented yet simultaneously pervasive feelings. There is never a possibility that this *malestar* is understood collectively, or systematically, in this context.

We could speculate that the isolation during this first period, coupled with the inequality of housework and care, as well as the de-personalisation of the woman – so that she is fully available to only others – could lead to this malaise. This is of course a component of the structural violence, which is not simply of an economic nature but also of a gendered and class-related sort (Han 2012). It is the *lucha*, or fight, of the everyday poor in Chile, fraught as it is with frictions between the sexes and with the weight of social reproduction on the woman. Indeed, these reasons appear in the discourse of women in the period after this first year. But they are not direct causes of the *malestar*, even if they operate undoubtedly as factors. They are a narrative that comes into full force after the liminal period but that does not map onto the body, experientially. This is knowledge at a distance from the phenomenology of *malestar*, which by definition is not translatable (even though it is heuristically translated here as malaise).

These are serious issues for the ethnographer, who must grapple with constant in-betweenness, allusion and the not-said in her ethnography. This can be complicated, in the best of senses. It suggests that knowledge may be half-formed, only to be confirmed later. In this particular case, we need to allow for
the women’s narratives, or lack of narrative, to be incomplete and incoherent; for the rhizome of partial articulation to lead to fragments of anthropological theorisation, ones that mirror the women’s own fragmentation in her own experience. In a book about queer identities, thresholds and crossings in Afro-Latinx religions, Solimar Otero argues for the impossibility of scholarship to produce ‘cultural knowability’ (2020: 87). Biographies and temporali­ties in these worlds are interlaced with those of invisible others, and these ‘Registers fool with the ability of ontology, language, and history to recognise and/or recover a stable social subject’ (2020: 87). We argue something similar in this ethnographic case – that women’s experience of malestar is intrinsically non-linear, incapacitating, and that it confounds both anthropological concepts (via the anthropologist) and native exegesis. In a country with little or no welfare policies, and with a marked emphasis on individualisation in relation not simply to labour but to health-seeking, the not-knowing becomes more debilitating and distressing at this early stage, which demands a hyper-agentic mothering.

‘Why did no one tell me it would be this hard?’ This question arises in a pervasive context of familial optimism with regards to bringing a child into the world. The ethos of the child as a miracle persists in narratives that are largely child-centred, where devotion is an exclusive factor. Motherhood is thus understood as somewhat of a deceit to many new mothers. ‘You see on social networks how wonderful it is to be a mother. Why did no one tell me it would be this difficult?’ This young mother’s thoughts are reflected in other narratives that have equally serious implications. These women attend medical centres replete with images of smiling breastfeeding women. There is an intersection of Catholic ethics of mother and child and a psychological attachment theory that visually impacts these mothers, and is followed by corresponding normative discourses that envelope the everyday. But often the inner states of the mothers are incoherent with these narratives of sacrifice and expectations of the ‘good mother’. If before birth it was difficult to make an appointment with the women in this study – due to the multifarious activities occupying their days before the event – after it, the reception was radically different. They wished for someone to express their malestar. ‘I’m stressed’, said Fernanda (30 years old). ‘The first two weeks were awful, I wanted to throw myself into a canal’. Or, ‘sometimes I want to throw the baby out of the window’ (Jocelyn, 32). This malestar increased during the sixth months post-birth. The mothers were distressed, irascible and sad. Simultaneously, its expression came coupled with severe guilt and preoccupation for the effect of its deployment in the domestic sphere, especially for women who had older children. One woman commented how sometimes she hated her eight-year-old daughter. ‘Sometimes it’s uncontrollable and I’m afraid it can generate trauma in her’. Another woman says:

I’m stressed, depressed. But I don’t know if it’s that. I don’t know whether I’ll be able to get a medical certificate because of this, I don’t know if there’s something more. But I’m irritable, I get angry for little things. I know this because
when Ignacio, my ten-year-old, says something, I scream at him, and after I’m profoundly sad. I don’t sleep well. I can’t say that I can definitely go back to work. I can’t leave him alone. The other day I saw in the news a story about a baby who died of reflux, drowned in his own vomit. I have to be here, taking care of him. (T, 29)

But we argue that we cannot read simple postnatal depression here between or in the lines. Instead, there is a ‘something’ that is perceived as a ‘nothingness’ in a context that denies words to these sentiments. Something they cannot identify or point to in these same sentiments. There is a sort of ‘mandate’ which demonstrates that the new mother is the main carer – which could lead to medical leave and job desertion – for the first year of the child’s life. This changes dramatically after the first year, where the grandmother or other older women take on the primary role of carers. This initial mandate, however, implies that emphasis will be exclusively on the child, to the detriment of the mental condition of their mother, as well as her earning power. In relation to a depression diagnosis, of which in the study there were two cases, there was no post-diagnosis follow-up on the part of the health institutions in terms of their mental wellbeing. One of these cases, medicated for depression even while pregnant, has not seen any improvement of her symptoms since beginning the treatment. But this is clearly not a medical problem exclusively. And neither is it looked on as such by the women. Part of this occurs undoubtedly because of a simple lack of time to even think. This male-star grows in intensity, claiming corners, becoming silently and stagnantly pervasive. Then come the ‘coping’ strategies that became linguistic, rhetorical devices, absorbed from popular language of the struggles of low-income communities. Devices such as lucha (fight), echar para adelante (moving forward), tirar para arriba (literally translated as ‘throwing upwards’), and so forth.

In her comparative study of parents and children in three pre-school communities in New York, Adrie Kusserow (2004) deploys a notion of North American individualism to show that the communities reproduce this idea in different ways. While middle-class children grow with a ‘soft’ individualism where creativity and self-expression are encouraged, working-class children grow up with a ‘hard’ individualism in which success is only guaranteed from hard work, discipline and determination in a ‘dangerous’ environment. This also works in Chile, to a degree. But there are different concepts of body involved. In low-income communities, people’s bodies are understood as ‘hard’, there is a ‘hard skin’ that is expected to develop, one impermeable to damage or hurt; it is the ultimate barrier, or gate. Women are also held to account in these terms. It is inconceivable that a woman would feel pain with breastfeeding or even with childbirth itself. It is a middle-class paying privilege to feel pain, as also to receive pain-relief. But even if there are linguistic strategies common to the working class in Chile, these do not erase the fact that the transformation of this first year is left undersigned, nebulous to the extreme, unclassifiable. But this means that this is an imminent grey area, one that is, moreover, contrary to expectations, carried on throughout
life, to a greater or lesser extent. During this initial immanent period, there is something unsaid which remains as unanchored background noise throughout the woman’s life, attached to how women reconfigure themselves and their social relations even after it. This is a constant even after they regain this new language.

There is a mismatch between layers of experience, or non-conceptualised suffering, and language here. We could call it in Spanish a *desfase*, which in English would translate (badly) to a gap or breach between two or more distinct entities. In relation to the anthropology of this text, one that aims to delineate some basic precepts for a dark anthropology, we thus have a novel concept. This breach or gap, as suggested in English, is static however. In this section we propose that this discontinuity is never static. Movement is of primary concern to *desfase*, not simply in relation to itself, as feelings that mutate and oscillate between articulation and non-articulation, between recognition and misrecognition, but also in relation to the greater scope of images and discourses that reside outside them and to which they must respond (or not respond) in some sense. What makes this example interesting for a dark anthropology is, first, that it identifies a region of pervasive experience that is not just undertheorised in the scholarly domain but not conceptualised by the experiencers themselves. But more importantly, it points to the injustice of an anthropological model which aims to ‘give voice’ to a community of underprivileged women whose dignity lies not in words themselves but often in the recognition of what is not resolved, not linguistic and often not even conceptual.

The Ineffable in Other Scholarly Languages, and a Discussion

The not-said, the not-had, including biographical narratives of extreme poverty of both a material and emotional nature (Steedman 1986), and the psychic and emotional experience of exclusion of queer identity in the 1980s (Anzaldúa 1987), basically, the inbetweenness of existential exclusion and marginalisation: this poststructural critique of normative culture is an important antecedent here. As a reviewer of this article rightly points out, there are many elements of violence that cannot be conveyed linguistically, or even understood. But in our reading, dark anthropology is not necessarily about violence, or about the non-articulable consequences of certain absences, such as affection. Rather, it is about fuzzy, interstitial or even absent propositional exegesis, one perhaps best conceived through notions of paradox, one that sometimes mediates with the possibility of knowledge, even if it is a distance from it. There is a different logic at stake; it may not be directly expressible through language, or it can be only indirectly indicative.

Thedorus Kyriakides and Richard Irvine argue as much in an article on ‘Not-knowing magic’ (2021). Not knowing is a domain that does not signal ignorance of cultural norms or cosmologies, or lack of knowledge. In their two
separate ethnographic fields (magic in Cyprus and Orkney) they are faced with addressing how magical thinking manifests under conditions where magic, as a unified corpus of bodily practice and knowledge “stutters” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986), and where magical experience presents itself as fragmented and erratic’ (1986: 3). Very often experiences are not coherent. But neither are they simply relational. Instead, spaces of not knowing, and distance to knowledge, become increasingly difficult to conceptualise in an anthropology that claims representational or totalistic hegemony, regardless of whether it sees itself as relativist or not (for a critique, see Argyrou 2002).

Here we could bring in other languages of inexpressability – the most obvious one being that of negative theology. Guy Bennett-Hunter notes that while largely neglected by philosophers, “the thought that God is incomprehensible, and that the divine nature therefore eludes literal linguistic articulation, is a commonplace in the Christian mystical tradition” (2015: 489), especially in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c.650–725), an unorthodox thinker associated with negative theology. Timothy Knepper notes how sometimes Dionysius uses hyper prefixes, for instance, hyper-being, hyper-god and hyper-good, which at the same time removes God from the picture, because the standard translation from the Greek ‘hyper’ is beyond (2015: 69). He also uses negation as a standard rhetorical technique. Furthermore, he also employs conflictive visual and spatial metaphors (2015: 72), such as ‘that God dwells in luminous darkness – darkness so dark that it is paradoxically brilliant, light so brilliant that it is paradoxically dark’ (2015: 72). A spatial metaphor would be God’s dwelling as the divine mountain, ‘the apex of which is enshrouded in luminous darkness’ (2015: 72); one that invites the climb, but once ascended enshrouds in profound unknowing. Thus, for Knepper, Dionysius employs various speech act strategies for expressing the inexpressible (2015: 73).

Apophasis, according to Catherine Keller, remits us to a cloud of the impossible, of unknowing, which reveals in turn ‘uncertainty as possibility’ (2014: 48). She says: ‘One may read in the Dionysian exercise’, of deconstructive negation, ‘rather than the binary dialectic or the triumph of the third way, the mistier third space of unfinished, indeed boundless exercise in self-transformation’ (2014: 74) – ‘not a neat nihil of names but a chaotic multiplicity, an overflow “in excess”’ (2014: 75). However, in both of the cases discussed, there is no multiplicity, but a stillness, a silence of something which cannot be cogitated in its present form, be this the ufological absurd or low-income malaise. But according to Keller, Nicholas de Cusa, another apophatic thinker, thematises the non-separability of God from the world as the apophatic (2014: 103). There is a paradox of representing a transcendent creator when He does not stand outside this very creation; where He is of it. It is an enfolding and unfolding God in a cosmos of interrelations, where these are seeped in possibility rather than limitation (Keller 2014).

Our examples are of a different order to the apophatic tradition whose prerogative was to articulate ineffability, not to reify its difficulty. But there is a
negation in both these examples that analytically remits to apophasis. In the ufological absurd there is clearly a lack of representational skill involved. But it is not skill itself that is in question but the representational drive itself. The ufological absurd is not simply unrepresentable – in its resistance, it represents itself, on multiple recursive scales, taking hold of the representational impetus itself (culture – such as the Independence Day craft) and making the phenomena a highly slippery one from an objective point of view. It is akin to Cusa’s Creating Creator, where the object of vision is ontologically inseparable from the perspective of the viewer: there is a feedback loop of non-separability. In the Chilean ufological absurd there is no immersion in superlative iridescence or darkness. One is confronted with the propositionally, perceptually and experientially illogical. There is no mysticism with which to find sense, perhaps because the interlocutors begin from a place of positivism and evidence, not religion. It is pure ontological clash, so to speak. It is the place of science fiction.

In the second example, an anthropology of ‘dark’ forms of experience must be unfinished, partial, unhealed, left open; that incoherence can and should be an analytical object, and not just a stepping stone along the way of a finished analysis. There is a way of approaching this mismatch that deals with social inequality and oppression, which are obvious to anyone who reads ethnography of low-income communities in Chile and elsewhere. However, we suggest that explanations along this path only partially ‘acknowledge’ the duration, and the embodied traces of malaise, and risk ignoring ‘the ethnographic exploration of mutable places in the field, which are interdicted to obscurity and the (political) forms that these interdictions may take’ (Napolitano 2015: 62). Becoming a mother is evidently full of these liminal phases. Yet, at the same time it is pregnant with darkness, bringing to the fore the very limitation of an anthropological understanding of liminality. Similar to some apophatic theologians, where ‘This nothing can be better felt than seen’ (Soelle 2001: 252, in Keller 2014: 84), there is an apophasis in this case which traverses the non-feelable, as well as sayable. In this particular case, the women both feel and are denied the basis of this feeling itself.

Conclusion

In this conclusion we come full circle to a fact we have only been attending to implicitly, in this paper – neoliberal capitalism in Chile. This is a space where globalised economic structures come into play, with their toxic forms of inequity and access to life (Biehl 2007). We must consider this here. From a general perspective, our two case studies bear little resemblance, apart from their resistance to conventional anthropological analytics. But if we look closer we can discern a common ‘frame’, if we use the term heuristically, and that is staunch capitalist materialism, with its reifications of individualism, freedom from state interference and scientific materialism. It is a system, while certainly in question after the
social upheaval of 2019, that nevertheless remains almost impenetrable. We are reminded of what Mark Fisher calls ‘capitalist realism’ (2009). There is a widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic model, but that it is now almost impossible to imagine a coherent alternative to it. This is deeply resonant with the system of free market capitalism developed within and after Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990). This specific kind of neoliberalism is manifest not only economically; it penetrates the most profound layers of existence in Chilean society. It has led to the emergence of hyper-agentic individuals (Araujo and Martuccelli 2014), who assume no reference or support in institutions, who find answers and solutions to social and physical ills on their own, and find it impossible to access a ‘shared’, collective, communal reality, through which those solutions could come by other means. Perhaps capitalism or in this case, neoliberalism, provides the limit of the thinkable, ‘outside’ of which lies only the ineffable, non-articulable, absurd. And perhaps this capitalism provokes a paralysis, or even conformity, towards that which is unexplainable. In the second case study, there is clearly no shared margin of experience that is offered as accessible. In the first case, the absurd flaunts a language that presents itself as coherent, logical and empirical, which conforms to a standard materialist ‘science’, even if in this case it is accepted by few outside its golden circle. In both these cases there are limits posed by the operative socioeconomic logics at stake.

But we have also argued that it is not enough to note this, that, as anthropologists, we have to use different tools to describe these non-descriptions or spaces of conceptual vacuum. It is not enough to explain them away. We need to come to grips with their structure. The first concept we have proposed is paradox. There is a sharp duality to paradox – ‘one thing is another, but it can be both, and therefore neither’ (Handelman 1998: 68) – which can create a gap, a border zone, a cleavage in the irreversible passage of time. In ufology, the absurd event does not take place ‘elsewhere’, but as a liminal space that is somehow created ad hoc. Paradox is essentially an illusion – an incommensurability between two logics and their incommensurable rules of play. David Napier says that ‘Our ability to recognize illusion depends upon the extent to which we accept some method of apprehending it. Such a statement sounds self-evident, yet what is called for is basically paradoxical: the acceptance of what empirically is not’ (1986: 5). Napier calls on us to reconsider the rules of self-sameness, of identity, and calls out our inability to see change as embedded in an emerging, unfolding reality (1986: 1–2). And it is a reality that sometimes resists objectification – that comports itself oddly, mobiusly, recursively.

In the ethnography of low-income mothers, paradox behaves differently. It manifests as an inconsistent knowledge that refuses signification. The body, and language, do not fully mediate a ‘reality’ at hand; or rather, they mediate it so well that it becomes opaque. There is something in this akin to what Thacker has proposed in the term ‘dark media’. He suggests by this the processes which
occur when media do not behave mediatically, when they are unavailable or inaccessible to the senses (2014: 85). In horror films these premises find interesting correlates. Thacker works especially with J-horror, some films of which exhibit this property of ‘weirdness’. In Junji Ito’s film *Uzumaki*, for instance, a seaside town becomes so transfixed by the geometrical shape of a spiral, that spirals begin appearing everywhere, from the grass, and the noodles in a bowl, to the shape of people’s bodies, contorted to the extreme (2014: 94). Thacker argues that what results is ‘negative mediation’ – the paradoxical idea that you can assert and verify the breach between two ontological orders (2014: 94). What we can take for a dark anthropology is not simply the idea that objects, or technologies, or even bodies, can mediate the ineffable to certain degrees of ambivalence or clarity, but that this mediation can become negative or dark to the extent that the object of mediation itself becomes equivalent to that being mediated. We are not trying to banalise what are serious cases of malaise for Chilean women. But in this case, the medium, the body, does not represent as much as become the malaise, becoming invisible to itself. This collapse has implications for the representational or conceptual content that becomes available, or in this case, absent.

The term ‘dark anthropology’ is originally defined by Sherry Ortner as one that ‘emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience’ (2016: 49–50), namely, often against the backdrop of neoliberalism. In our version of a dark anthropology, the ethnographer must come to terms with paradoxes of meaning which stunt conceptual or logical exegesis. Much of this ‘stunting’, we would argue, has to do with the social and political constraints of the ‘dark’ experience itself, such as the stunting of humanity that comes from extreme forms of neoliberalism and its inequities, as much as with our limitations as scholars to understand it. Our argument has been that there are alternative tools to write it – ones that highlight discrepancies and inconsistencies and paradoxes instead of fully formed paradigms.

**Acknowledgements**

The research underlying this article was enabled by several financial resources. The first is the ANID’s Programa de Investigación Asociativa (PIA) fund, grant number SOC180033. The second is Marjorie Murray’s Fondecyt Regular, fund number 1181503. Both Diana Espírito Santo and Marjorie Murray would like to thank their interlocutors for their generosity in sharing their stories, and also their research assistants, Daniela Tapia, Constanza Tizzoni and Alejandra Vergara. Marjorie Murray would also like to acknowledge her UNICEF research on early child-rearing among vulnerable communities in Santiago, through the Centro de Estudios Avanzados sobre Justicia Educacional (ANID PIA CIE160007). Paulina Salinas thanks ANID’s PIA SOC180033. The three authors thank the peer reviewers of this article for their excellent critical comments.
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Les comportements sans le savoir face à la doctrine néolibérale au Chili : une esquisse de l’anthropologie méconnue

A travers deux études de cas ethnographiques, qui sont très distinctes mais basées à Santiago du Chili toutes les deux, nous soutenons le besoin de nous intéresser aux expériences qui ne sont pas conceptualisées par nos interlocuteurs, ou qui restent «obscures» en termes de leurs propriétés ontologiques et représentationnelles. Nous soulignons que l’anthropologie est mal équipée pour traiter ces marges ineffables, tout en proposant des liens conceptuels qui pourraient être utilisés transversalement dans ce que nous appelons une «anthropologie sombre». Les deux domaines en question ici sont l’ «absurde» ufologique et les expériences de maternage précoce au sein des communautés à faibles revenus. Tous les deux ont en commun de défier les logiques anthropologiques figure-fond, où les expériences sont généralement expliquées par leurs contextes sociaux. Nous plaidons pour une anthropologie capable d’aborder les socialités non linéaires et parfois sombres.

Mots clés : ineffable, maternage, paradoxe, théologie négative, ufologie