NO ONE CAN HOLD IT BACK

The Theopolitics of Water and Life in Chilean Patagonia without Dams

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Abstract: The slogan “Water is Life” rallies anti-extractive movements across the Americas. Critical theorists, however, decry the circumscription of environmental politics by the vitalist attribution of political agency to liveliness. This article tempers that critique by juxtaposing it to the Catholic Church’s claims to sovereignty over life, deploying the resulting slippages between water and life to explore the theopolitical potencies that emerge in water’s oscillations between non-life and the divine. Exploring these oscillations in a dam conflict in Chilean Patagonia, I argue that they allowed a flooding phenomenon on a river threatened with damming to be heard as a prophetic call to action. The uprising that followed produced a rare victory for dam opponents, suggesting that a theopolitics of life has powers that exceed vitalism.

Keywords: Catholic Church, dams, extractives, Patagonia, radio, theopolitics, vitalism, water

During my 2011 fieldwork in a small town named Cochrane, in the remote south of the Aysén region of Chilean Patagonia, one song invariably energized revelers at community dances. “Loco Loco,” the lament of a man in unrequited love, is punk-cumbia band Chico Trujillo’s 2001 cover of a 1960s hit. The verses of the song’s first half, in which the narrator’s mother counsels him to renounce the object of his desires, build to its second half, which is just the refrain, “*Agua que no has de beber, déjala correr*” called out repeatedly over fast cumbia rhythms. This expression works like the English “don’t be a dog in the manger,” but literally translates as “the water you can’t drink, let it flow.” Whenever “Loco Loco” came on—and it always did—dancers would chant this refrain while losing themselves to its beat.

At the time of the song's popularity, Cochrane was ground zero of a nationwide environmental conflict over a dam project known as HidroAysén. Running from the 43rd to the 49th parallel south, thousands of kilometers from Santiago, Aysén is a remote and sparsely populated land of forests, mountains and ravines, ice fields, and many large rivers—the kind of landscape often associated with legendary Patagonia. A private consortium of Chilean and Spanish capital, HidroAysén proposed to build five hydroelectric megadams on two of the region's rivers—the Baker, which runs through the valley in which Cochrane is the only major settlement, and the Pascua, to Cochrane's still more remote south. The 2.75 gigawatts of electricity the dams would generate were not for local consumption; rather, they were to be transported more than 2,300 kilometers north to Santiago and the central electrical grid. An environmentalist campaign against the project, known as Patagonia Sin Represas (PSR, Patagonia without Dams), had managed to slow HidroAysén's passage through environmental review. But despite PSR's efforts, everyone dancing to "Loco Loco" assumed that the project was too big and had too many friends in Santiago to fail.

As expected, Aysén's regional government approved HidroAysén on 9 May 2011. Three years later, however, Michelle Bachelet, the newly re-elected president of Chile who campaigned against this decision, canceled the project's approval, citing three key PSR arguments. So momentous was this reversal that it earned HidroAysén a spot on the *Guardian's* list of 12 dams that changed the world by *not* being built (Bosshard 2015). A key factor in this victory for dam opponents was a 2012 uprising in which Ayseninos blockaded all main points of entry into the region, holding the barricades for three weeks despite a fierce display of force by Chile's highly militarized police. Participants in the uprising had different demands, but they were joined by a sense of territorial aggrievement against the abuses of the central government. As Bachelet recognized, in a long, narrow country where the task of securing distant frontiers has challenged central governments since independence, this claim to Patagonian power was no minor incident.

The resonances of the ecstatic refrain of "Loco Loco" in this historic victory are too powerful not to speculate about what might motivate them. Affect theory suggests that the excessive and involuntary joy liberated by acts such as dancing endows them with the capacity to undo otherwise reified boundaries among bodies—human and otherwise—thus bonding humans with other forms of matter through our shared liveliness (see, e.g., Bennett 2009). A growing body of anthropological writing on the Anthropocene¹ contends that stretching our relational imaginaries to form new alliances in this fashion is imperative in a moment when all of life is threatened by extinction, thanks not least to extractive projects like HidroAysén (e.g., Tsing et al. 2017). Perhaps it was life itself that both moved Cochraninos on the dance floor and swept them to the barricades.

Relying on life to give substance to our struggles against extinction, however, also begs the question of what these struggles aim to accomplish. Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) argues that our current crisis exposes the contours of a regime of ‘geontopower’ that undergirds the biopolitical distinction between life and death with a wider one between ‘Life and Nonlife’. This distinction conditions political and ethical recognition on the qualities of self-organization and self-containment that are associated with Life, designating Nonlife, which Povinelli calls ‘geos’, as mere inertness. Geos renders the analytics that Povinelli’s indigenous interlocutors have developed for engaging things like rocks, fogs, or watery formations as either inspirational animism or primitive totemism. Since vitalism participates in this rendering, Povinelli urges us to shift our focus from Life to Nonlife, which “created what it is radically not, Life, and will in time fold this extension of itself back into itself as it has already done so often and long” (ibid.: 176).

But if we reject the promise of life, what should we make of the rallying cry “Water is Life,” under which anti-extractive movements across the Americas, including PSR, have organized with increasing success? Here we might note that life is a key category not only for geontopower but for the Catholic Church, which has long claimed sovereignty over all of life’s forms. In Christian theology, water is the medium of God’s grace, that is, the material substance of this sovereignty. The long history of the Church’s temporal assertion of its sovereign claims, not least in the colonization of the Americas, might thus be viewed as a series of attempts to implement the sacramental infrastructures of this hydropolitical theology. The projects and analytics that these infrastructures undergird sometimes function analogously to or in collusion with geontopower. In their inclusion of the divine, however, they nonetheless participate in a different configuration of the relationship between humans and that which is more-than-us, potentially with different entailments for the struggle against extinction.

In what follows, I recover the traces of the Catholic hydropolitical in Aysén’s dam conflict to desecularize water, life, and the struggles that take place under the aegis of their equivalence. My purpose is not to reinstate the Church’s sovereignty over any of these entities. Instead, I ask when and through what mediations water lives as grace in order to explore the theopolitical possibilities that this form of life opens up in the space between geos and theos. Theopolitics, as we have defined it (introduction, this issue), deploys the propensity of the divine to withdraw from the scene of power as well as pronounce on it to challenge the assumption of omnipotence that is secularized in Schmittian models of sovereignty through the hierarchical logic of the exception. A theopolitical analytics probes “the theological sensoria through which performances by ... a host of more-than-human entities are able to incarnate” the substances of politics in the wake of divine withdrawal (ibid.). Water is the substance of life, but its liquid properties notoriously exceed attempts at its capture not only by capital and nature, but also God (e.g., Bakker 2010; Cunha 2019; Keller 2005).

Its exceedance to these entities offers critical affordances for the performance of a sovereignty that partakes of the messianic logic of the emergency, overflowing confinement in the exception. Insofar as it oscillates between being non-life and living as grace, in short, water is an eminently theopolitical medium.

The theopolitical question for struggles like the one against HidroAysén, therefore, is how water's affordances made themselves felt. In Cochrane, watery excess took the form of flooding on the Baker River, which began to periodically beset those who lived along its banks shortly after the dams were proposed. As signal events of both the Anthropocene and the Bible, floods are often treated as direct pronouncements by more-than-human forces. Yet the resonances of the chorus of "Loco Loco" suggest that rhythm and spacing can also serve to articulate these forces. The extraordinary potency of Aysenino protests against HidroAysén, I argue, emerged from the communion with the Baker that the rhythms of its waters offered those who know the river best. Here I trace when and by what mediations these rhythms came to be imbued with grace in order to explore the contours of the sovereignty that they provisionally but explosively animated.

Water Is Life

Battles against large-scale extractives like HidroAysén are increasingly central to progressive politics throughout the Americas. At the leading edge of contemporary processes of accumulation by dispossession, extractivism is also a key means by which capitalism weaves itself into what Jason Moore (2015) calls the 'web of life', making extractive projects both markers and movers of ecological crisis. Challenges to these projects thus represent an opportunity to slow or even interrupt the earth's warming, as well as ongoing violent enclosure. Yet if capitalism is as thoroughly enmeshed in the web of life as Moore suggests, disentangling the two will require some ingenuity.

The slogan "Water is Life" attempts to rise to this challenge. If you are involved with anti-extractive movements, your social media feeds, like mine, are likely filled with memes and event posters bearing variations on this slogan, such as "Water is life, not a commodity," "You are 75 percent water, 0 percent gold, which one will you choose?" or "Love water, not oil!" These statements use water to frame the stakes of anti-extractivism as literally vital—and correctly so, for the contamination and enclosure of water brought about by extractives profoundly threaten the access of the living to this vital substance. The political entailments of water's vitality are meant to be just as obvious as the truth of the slogan: if water is life, then extractives are death, and the struggle against extractives is a mortal one.

But despite these plain truths, water is increasingly commodified. Chile, which thanks to economic reforms enacted by students of Milton Friedman

under the dictatorship of August Pinochet (1973–1990) enjoys a well-deserved reputation as neoliberalism’s ‘model’, was a pioneer of its commodification. Among the most radical of Pinochet’s neoliberal reforms was the 1981 Water Code, which recognized water in principle as a public good, but also granted water usage rights for free, in perpetuity, and for whatever legal use their holders saw fit, including sale, and defined these rights as “the property of their owner.” The Code created a new market for water rights, leading to their concentration in a few hands. This enabled a vast expansion of industries requiring water resources, including extractives, even as the contradictions that the liquid properties of water generate among rights claimants have confounded tidy resolution (Bakker 2010; Bauer 2004). After decades of attempts to replicate it elsewhere, Chile’s water regime remains the world’s most privatized, but also one of its most consistently conflictive.

HidroAysén was a creature of this regime. In 2006, when the project was proposed, 98 percent of Aysén’s non-consumptive water rights were owned by Endesa, one-half of the HidroAysén consortium. Founded in 1944 as the state-owned electrical utility, Endesa gained these rights when the Chilean government first considered damming the Baker and Pascua in the late 1960s, and retained them after Endesa’s 1989 privatization. When Spanish investors bought the corporation shortly thereafter, the rights were also included in the sale.

During the early 2000s commodity boom, Chile’s economy, which depends heavily on mining, enjoyed high levels of growth. But mining needs energy, and short-sighted investments as well as the impacts of climate change were straining Chile’s privatized electrical grid, a problem passed along to ordinary households in the form of increasingly expensive electricity. HidroAysén stepped into this breach, promising to rescue the economy by investing billions of dollars to augment Chile’s energy supply by one-third by mobilizing its water rights. An extensive public relations campaign, featuring images of lights going out during surgery or while children tried to do homework, framed the project as critical to the well-being of Chile’s households. The slogan for this campaign was “Clean, renewable, Chilean,” with each of these concepts represented by a drop of water; each ad also concluded with the refrain “HidroAysén: In favor of water.”

Dam opponents countered HidroAysén’s message that water could be life if properly mediated by capital by portraying the harm that capital does to life itself. In 2007, the Council for the Defense of Patagonia, a coalition of national and international environmentalist NGOs and Aysén-based groups, launched the PSR campaign. While working through legal and governmental channels to challenge HidroAysén’s application for environmental approval, PSR also produced a massive advertising campaign that portrayed Aysén’s landscape in a series of spectacular images as a unique national patrimony of wilderness that would be threatened by the dams. The ads claimed Aysén was a “reserve of life,” not only because of the charismatic endangered species who live there, but also because

its putative pristinity represents a bulwark against planetary extinction. Water figured prominently in the ads, but more as an aesthetic element of the landscape's composition than the heart of a riparian world, emphasizing the pleasing unity of Patagonian nature over its often less picturesque human realities.

But as this depiction suggests, PSR's efforts to rescue life from capture by HidroAysén also depended heavily on capital, here in its green avatar. In Patagonia, the category of life has long been closely linked to capitalist expansion. Darwin's theory of natural selection as a constant, agonistic transformation of the single entity he called 'life itself' germinated on his voyage with the *Beagle*, a ship mapping commercial routes for British trade in this part of the world. This entity came home to roost when the Chilean and Argentine states used social Darwinist arguments to legitimate their late-nineteenth-century drive to exterminate the indigenous inhabitants of unconquered southern regions.

The claim that Aysén was a "reserve of life" tended to naturalize this exterminationist history. It was born in the early 1990s when a Coyhaique-based group of conservationists and tour operators used this banner as a branding strategy to promote the extraordinary "quality of life" that the region's isolation had preserved. This tendency gained strength as the battle over Aysén's rivers heated up, now with the patronage of American millionaire and deep ecologist Douglas Tompkins, who in the early 1990s had spent much of his fortune buying up large tracts of Patagonian land for conservation and park creation and supporting local conservationist allies. When it became clear that HidroAysén's transmission lines would pass through his biggest park, the Santiago-based conservationist NGOs that Tompkins had funded joined the Coyhaique coalition to form the Council for the Defense of Patagonia. Tompkins also helped to fund the Council, endowing the PSR campaign with an unusually strong financial footing.

Tompkins's involvement gave him considerable influence over PSR strategies. One consequence was that the campaign adopted an exclusionary stance toward those who stood to suffer the greatest impact from HidroAysén. Cochrane, which welcomes travelers with a sign announcing itself as the "last frontier," lies 330 kilometers down a poorly maintained gravel highway from Coyhaique. Its population of around 3,000 people are mostly small-scale sheep and cattle ranchers who identify as *gauchos*. Their presence on this land is hard-won, bequeathed to them as descendants of migrant laborers who were pushed out of Chile into Argentina after the late-nineteenth-century defeat of the Mapuche kingdom, and who came home only in the 1920s when the Chilean government needed homesteaders to assert its sovereignty over this remote territory. Offered hundreds of acres of land if they could clear it, Aysén's settlers did their best to "make Chile" on its last frontier with axes, fire, and livestock. The state cheered them on without providing any infrastructure or services, instead granting huge concessions on the best ranching land in the region to large, mostly British-owned sheep-farming corporations. In the Baker valley, the

concession of 110,000 hectares to one such company, the Sociedad Río Baker, pushed gaucho settlements to the broken and forested terrain on the far side of the powerful river from Argentina and its roads and markets, condemning gauchos to ongoing logistic and economic difficulties.

PSR's emphasis on landscape effected a profound erasure of this hardscrabble legacy. Gaucho desires for greater connectivity and their propensity for clearing land, opening roads, and killing native predators were also anathema to conservationists. PSR thus tended to ignore or even belittle Cochranino concerns about the project. This insult was compounded by the purchase and rewilding of the property formed in the 1920s by the Sociedad Río Baker, which not only removed a key object of Cochranino pastoralist longings from production, but also halved the local livestock economy and increased local predator populations.

Gauchos repaid these injuries with seething hatred of Tompkins. Local anti-dam opponents were forced to distance themselves from PSR to maintain their community relationships, further marginalizing Cochrane from campaign decision making. This dynamic was politically short-sighted, for under Chile's environmental legislation, the only people considered to be formally "affected" by a project are those whose properties will suffer immediate impacts—in the case of HidroAysén, the few families who own land on the banks of the two rivers threatened with damming. The campaign thus abandoned key stakeholders to HidroAysén's blandishments and threats, which were wielded ever more aggressively as the struggle intensified.

But despite their alienation from PSR, Cochraninos rose up with the rest of Aysén in 2012. A week into the uprising, the regional government tried to evade blockades farther north by sneaking in a tank of gas through a tiny ferry port south of Cochrane. Before making his delivery, the driver of the truck carrying the tank parked outside town and walked in to get dinner at the local restaurant. After he foolishly described his errand to the restaurant owners, who happened to be dam opponents, they called on everyone they knew to throw up a barricade at the small bridge that serves as Cochrane's southern entrance. When the truck and its cargo arrived, the driver found his passage blocked by a pile of logs and fencing materials, crowned by the giant metal grill that is used to barbecue a whole calf during town festivals. For the next two weeks, a few dozen people took turns preventing the gas tank from passing, sustained by so many supportive gifts of meat from their neighbors that they all gained weight. When the barricades were lifted, a hundred people (a record for Cochranino protests) marched through the town carrying a banner that proclaimed "*Más dignos que nunca*" (More dignified than ever).

Against all odds, the reverberations of this claim to dignity proved powerful enough to keep the Baker and the Pascua flowing freely. But recognizing these downstream effects should not obscure the fact that voicing this claim also represented a resistance to PSR's claims on Patagonia, reinstating gauchos

as the arbiters of life in their territory against both the neoliberal state and the green gentrifiers. As one Cochranino participant in the many Facebook discussions that sprang up during the uprising wrote: “The roads were opened by our pioneers, friends and family, under snow, rain, and frost. The roads are ours ... Understand, we are not seeking permission.”²

The Living Water

How was this dignified refusal to seek permission inflected by the positive claim that “water is life”? Here I note that while this slogan states a plain truth, it is also a metaphor, working to explain something difficult to grasp—the target domain—in terms of something easier—the source domain (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003). The mappings of this metaphor traced earlier tend to treat the source as life and the target as water, such that we are meant to know water through the ways in which it resembles life. If life in this context is something like the Darwinian concept—with its Patagonian history—of life itself, defined by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2004: 19) as “an open and generative force of self-organization and growing complexity” varying contingently over time, then the metaphor maps water as something that envelops us and connects us at our origins. That is, something like the ocean, “the fountain from which all life on earth emerged” (Peters 2015: 54), or amniotic fluid, in which we all float (Neimanis 2017). As these materializations suggest, this mapping tends to bleed the two sides of the metaphor into each other, affirming Povinelli’s critique of vitalism by threatening to homogenize different human relationships to water and render it available to the favors of actors like HidroAysén.

The subtitle of Povinelli’s (2016) book, “A Requiem to Late Liberalism,” is intended to evoke the “intersection of affects” (ibid.: 64) appropriate to the deflating but inevitable conclusion we should draw from such tendencies, namely, that life offers no escape from carbonization. Yet the task of de-dramatizing life is a strange one to demand of a Requiem, which is the traditional Catholic mass for the dead. A key liturgical element of the Requiem is the “Dies Irae” (Day of Wrath), a famously beautiful medieval hymn that depicts the Apocalypse in verses like “Day of wrath and doom impending/Heaven and earth in ashes ending,” evoking a mood that one late-nineteenth-century scholar characterized as the “dogma of fear.” So powerful was its conjuring of this mood that when Vatican II shifted the Church’s emphasis from the supplication of God to the redemptive power of Christ’s sacrifice, the “Dies Irae” was removed from the ordinary funeral liturgy, making it an ongoing touchstone of traditionalist grumbling. Perhaps invocations of the Requiem, rather than de-dramatizing life, should remind us that the relationship between life and that which lies beyond it has long been a terrain of theological as well as affective struggle.

A Requiem might also remind us that there are other traditions than the Darwinian for construing the relationship between life and water. In 2008, as HidroAysén was getting underway, the Catholic bishop of Aysén, Luis Infanti de la Mora (2008), issued a pastoral letter entitled *Danos hoy el agua de cada día* (Give Us This Day Our Daily Water). An ally of PSR, Infanti linked “sister water,” a Franciscan term, to Aysén’s watery ecology and its people’s needs, to a critique of Chile’s privatized water and energy regimes, and finally to a theological discussion of the relationship between water and Creation. In the Book of John, Infanti notes, Jesus offers to quench the thirst of those who believe in him, making “rivers of living water” flow from their hearts (John 7:37–39; see also John 4:14). This harkens to Jeremiah, in which God is described as “the fountain of living water” (Jeremiah 17:3), and to images of God’s grace—the condition of possibility for eternal life—filling souls as though they were cups. Lest this language be taken as merely symbolic, Infanti points out that water is the substance on which God worked to create all living things and that rites like baptism and blessing incarnate God’s grace in the faithful by washing them in holy water. His exegesis concludes with an enjoinder to Christians to bear witness to the unity of Creation and the Creator by caring for the substance of that unity in all its watery materiality.

Critical theory has taken up religious tradition as a site for generating the forces to fight environmental depredation that appeals to science have so far failed to inspire. Bruno Latour (2009: 463), for example, argues that “whereas ecological consciousness has been unable to move us, the religious drive to renew the face of the earth just might.” Christianity’s attunement to *kairos*, the apocalyptic end time of Pauline and Augustinian theologies, is one such drive. For Latour (2017: 219), acknowledging that time might end—and soon—frees us from modernity’s tyrannical insistence on settling the question of the world’s nature through procedural reasoning. Thus liberated, we can instead form more-than-human coalitions based on the distinction between friends and enemies that Carl Schmitt ([1996] 2007) takes as the essence of the political. Infanti’s hydropolitics might be read as defining the terms of one such distinction, dividing good Christians from soulless capital. But framing *kairos* through Schmitt’s secularizing account of the relationship between theology and politics makes it a mere analogue of our current crisis, begging the question of how kairotic demands for renewal like Infanti’s exert their pull.

Those who joined the Aysén uprising did not experience their participation as a decision but a compulsion. Over the years I spent watching the HidroAysén conflict develop, I often wondered what it would take for something like the uprising to happen. In Cochrane, even the project’s fiercest opponents tended to privilege good relations with neighbors, which are necessary for surviving in a small community, over public expressions of protest. But they also warned me not to mistake calm for quiescence, insisting, “We gauchos don’t get angry

easily, but when we do, we get angry *de verdad* [for real].” And in 2012, they got angry. The explanation people gave for participating was simply “*Estamos priva’os*,” a Patagonian expression that means “We are angry, fed up, beside ourselves,” but translates literally as “We are bereaved” or “deprived.” It is sometimes intensified as “*Estamos priva’os del cuerpo*” (We are deprived of our body), meaning “We are so angry we cannot even speak.” The implication was that they had been transported to the barricades almost in spite of themselves. Nicasio Luna, Cochrane’s most beloved native singer-songwriter, echoed this sense of being swept away in a composition addressed to the officials who tried to repress the uprising: “The limits of our patience have passed/and you have the consequence/the unity of our people ... Open your eyes, *señores*/you will not stop the flow [*no pararán los caudales*].”

The word *caudal*, which refers to the volume of water carried by a river, asserts a correspondence between riparian energies and the unstoppable forces of the uprising. This was echoed in the version of “Water is Life” preferred by Cochrane’s local anti-dam activists: “*El Baker vive, la lucha sigue*” (The Baker lives, the fight goes on). The specificity of this correspondence returns us to the question of when and how water lives. For theologian Catherine Keller (2018: 10), a liberatory ecological politics needs to pay attention to the “modes of hiddenness” that apophatic theology offers in order to undercut the sovereign ‘we’ that Schmitt and Latour would reinstate over and among more-than-human friends. Her account of these modes turns from the end of the world to its beginnings, and thus to water. In *The Face of the Deep*, Keller (2003) argues that the Western imaginary is haunted by the waters upon which God performed the work of Creation, not because they were nothing prior to this work, but rather because their depths held something that preceded it, a mystery that we might associate with non-life. But Keller (2018: 55) sees the awe that this inspires in much mainstream theology (and possibly critical theory as well) as misrepresenting the destabilization of God’s omnipotence as a threat to the divine itself. Recognizing the work of the divine within the depths, not just on or against them, instead affirms divine action as a form of “entangle[ment] in a dense precarity of relations” (ibid.: 55), emanating from the place of a weakened Messiah who is capable of contracting time into *kairos* but not making the decision to end it. The hope this Messiah might offer is never assured of fulfillment, but in its “layered, mourning, improbable possibility” (ibid.: 33), it can nonetheless find space to gather forces.

Infanti is no theologian of apophysis, but his call to bear witness to Creation through the medium of water opens a space for this theopolitical hope at the heart of the Catholic hydropolitical. If water is life because Jesus is the living water, then it lives because it circulates through the mystery of something that loves life without being life—and because it also partakes of something other than life. Here the equivalence between water and life is repurposed for its

rhythmic possibilities rather than its factuality. It suggests that we are meant not only to know water by the way it resembles life but also to know life by the way it resembles water—water that flows, eddies, fills, spills, exceeds, or withholds itself as much as it envelops, something that exhibits tendencies to direction, spacing, and musicality as well as surges of divine force.

These are the rhythms of the rites of blessing, but also of the Flood, which was not the end of Creation but its remaking. Moving to this rhythm, life might be less an ocean than a river, as in Luna's song. It might even be the Baker itself. Forced to settle on the other side of its unbridged waters from the outside world, gauchos have long had to navigate the Baker's currents in small rowboats, only recently motorized, often towing animals behind them. Accidents or failures of animal or human strength are almost always fatal. Today people wear life jackets, but they joke that it is only so their bodies will be found if they capsize. A still more dramatic display of the river's force comes when the Baker's waters overtake its course. When I began working in Cochrane, I heard about two floods, in 1956 and in 1963, that grew the Baker into something like a tidal wave, swamping properties on its banks and sweeping away livestock. Gauchos gestured at these mysterious events with the observation, "No one can hold back the Baker." If the life of the Baker was what kept the struggle going, no wonder the force of the struggle was irresistible.

No One Can Hold It Back

Kairos, however, is a time as well as a force of contraction. People did not always come together in the flow; gauchos were calm and patient before they were not. Here I return to "Loco Loco" to explore when and how the Baker became incarnate in the struggle. One way of understanding the song's popularity in the lead-up to HidroAysén's provisional approval would be as propaganda for Infanti's pastoral letter. As previously noted, the version of the song we danced to in 2011 was released 10 years prior, in 2001. I asked Claudia Torres, the host of a popular afternoon news program on Radio Santa María, the station of the Catholic diocese of Aysén that is heard throughout the region, about the song's curiously timely reappearance. She told me that in her previous job as the host of a municipal radio program in a tiny village at the mouth of the Baker, she had often played "Loco Loco," a practice she continued when she moved to Santa María. Torres herself was a dam opponent, and in the build-up to the decision on the dams, she laughed, "we used that song a lot."

Yet the words of the chorus, however apt their message, do not explain why dancers moved to its beat. In Chile, music has long been understood as a political act, but in Patagonia music and dancing are better conceived as the very condition of possibility of the political. Even in recent memory, the vast

distances among rural Patagonian households meant that many people regularly interacted only with family members or the handful of neighbors who could be easily reached on horseback. But this isolation was regularly broken by bacchanalian house parties, held for the annual branding of the cattle or large building projects, which gathered kin and friends from a wider geographical range to contribute their labor. These gatherings lasted for days, enlivening the work with copious drinking, singing, playing of accordions and guitars, and dancing. Even now that most people have houses in town and enjoy more frequent social congress, gatherings are still times for singing and playing music, and often for dancing. When someone falls ill or a community project needs financing, the town responds by selling tickets to *grandes bailables*, big dance parties. Collectivity beyond the scale of the family is pleurably embedded in music and rhythmic movement.

Radio Santa María echoes this feature of Patagonian life by placing music at the heart of its varied programming. All hosts play full songs between stretches of conversation, even when their show is not a musical one. More unusually (and, to my ears, sometimes annoyingly), news programming is overlaid on a musical soundtrack, usually a sample from a popular song—perhaps even “Loco Loco”—played over and over, swelling in volume between items.

This soundscape emerges from a process of deliberate Church compenetration with the enterprise of gaucho colonization of Aysén. Although the region’s population was nominally Catholic, the Church played little role in the early years of settlement, to the degree that a Jesuit missionary claimed a woman he visited in 1950 near Cochrane had never heard of God (Martinic Beros 2005: 328). To remedy this ignorance, the Order of Don Guanella—named for a priest who worked with the poor in the tradition of social Catholicism—established a post in the region, sending an Italian priest named Antonio Ronchi as its missionary. Ronchi spent most of the next four decades wandering Aysén’s most remote stretches—first on foot or horseback and later by plane—helping to build small bridges, chapels, roads, and other basic infrastructure alongside administering the sacraments. Eventually, he built radio towers as well, creating networks that allowed people not only to hear news, but also to share it across Aysén’s vast distances, thanks to community news hours hosted by every radio station. The priest’s tendency to undertake these projects without seeking official permission often got him in trouble, but the communities he served loved him, and he proudly called himself *el curita rasca* (the vulgar little priest) to signal his allegiance with the poor and humble.

Founded in 1979, Radio Santa María piggybacked on Ronchi’s vulgar little infrastructures and now provides much of the programming for the stations he established. Santa María’s slogan, “Where the roads don’t reach,” charts the scope of the sonic claim to Church sovereignty over Aysén that the radio enfleshes, one less in competition with the state than indifferent to it. As

Bishop Infanti noted in a mass broadcast to celebrate the station's 40th anniversary (preceded by a few bars of dance music, accompanied by guitar playing, and punctuated by popular Patagonian-themed hymns): "We have walked the length ... of this region, to bring the good news and feel ourselves called to this encounter." The prayer that followed made a more explicit link between the Church's spiritual pedagogy and gaucho efforts to make Aysén's terrain habitable: "Let us live our faith in the building of your kingdom among us, your children who peregrinate in our austral Patagonia." Despite such pious interludes, the kingdom that Santa María mediates is marked as more Patagonian than Catholic, defined by the fact that, as the host of a popular music program would regularly intone between songs, "*Entre gauchos no hay tranqueras*" (Between gauchos there are no gates). But it still claims the peregrinating flow of gauchos that its mediations enable as sacred.

In the early 2000s, Aysén's regional government laid its own claim to this soundscape by funding the purchase and installation of CB radios for rural households, allowing municipalities to check in with remote constituents for emergencies or messages. Yet this ostensibly governmental technology was swiftly integrated into prior traditions of aural community. Although everyone I knew insisted they had better things to do than listen to their neighbors, check-in times always meant taking a break from work to tune in, and tuning in often meant gossiping with friends on a different frequency, or at least commenting on the news with family members. These communicative practices meant that strangers like me could visit new places dozens of kilometers away and be hailed by the greeting, "Oh yes, we've heard about you!"

Events the year of the publication of Infanti's pastoral letter conspired to include the Baker in this community, but unlike me this participant had the power to surprise. In January 2008, HidroAysén released the baseline study for its environmental impact assessment. The company had spared no expense, deploying researchers from a number of prestigious Chilean universities to the hitherto uninvestigated reaches of southern Aysén and producing many findings of note—but none pertaining to the Baker's history of flooding. In April 2008, as if in response to this omission, the Baker flooded anew—catastrophically. Although no humans died, many animals did, and houses that lay too close to the river were flooded. Two additional floods in 2008, while less damaging than the first, drove home the fact that this once singular occurrence could happen any time. Indeed, every year since 2008 has witnessed several floods, marking the advance of the planet's warming.

The floods bore obvious implications for HidroAysén, as the sudden increase in the volume of the river's flow and the sediments the flood carried could potentially overwhelm a dam, with apocalyptic consequences for those living downstream. For the first time, therefore, the Baker's floods attracted external attention. First came the scientists, who traced the source of the April 2008

flood to a lake, the Cachet II, which lies in the glacier above the Colonia River, a tributary of the Baker. They determined that melting at the bottom of the glacier had opened a tunnel between the lake and the Colonia, through which 3 billion square meters of water had been dumped into the Baker over 12 hours, affecting its flow up to 25 kilometers upstream and downstream all the way until its mouth in the Pacific. The incident was classified as a glacial lake overflow phenomenon, or GLOF.

Next, various actors scrambled to manage the GLOF. GLOFs are inherently unpredictable, but observations suggested that flooding happened only after melting raised the lake to a certain level, and that the lead time between the opening of the tunnel and the emergence of the water into the Baker afforded a short window for advance warning of the flood. After the second 2008 GLOF, the heads of Cochrane's local anti-dam organization began to trek up to the lake to monitor its levels so they could warn people living along the river, important constituents for the organization, of any changes portending new flooding. Their efforts were swiftly superseded, however, by an unusual alliance of glacier tourism operators, municipal officials, state ministries, and glaciologists, who installed a camera on the lake's bank to monitor its levels remotely, enabling the municipality to sound a flood alarm over the network of CB radios. Gauchos said they had always known when a flood was coming because the sound of the rocks in the river would change, but now the municipality assumed this authority.

HidroAysén, meanwhile, ignored the GLOF in the first iteration of its environmental impact study, although it was submitted in August 2008 well after the phenomenon was described. This omission became a focus of PSR critiques of HidroAysén, one that government officials who had been charged with reviewing the study also questioned. After successive iterations of the study, HidroAysén came around to acknowledging the GLOF, but refused to alter its plans to accommodate it. PSR activists talked up this refusal on national media and regional radio stations like Santa María, making it a touchstone of common knowledge about the project's flaws. And all the while, the Baker continued to flood.

Described by Sarah Whatmore (2013: 45) as "geopolitical events," floods question "the ontological settlement that divides the social from the natural, and which expert environmental management practices assume and perpetuate." But in so doing, they also force other questions, namely, what settlement, for whom, and by whom? In "1492: A New View," Sylvia Wynter (1995: 17) notes that the biblical event of the Flood was a critical hinge between the old "image of the earth" that Columbus's voyage dispelled and the new one it brought into being. Under the tenets of the scholastic geography Columbus set out to challenge, the Western hemisphere, which was deprived of the grace of God, had to be entirely submerged under water. Columbus's 'discovery' of land upended

this non-homogeneous earth, making it possible in the process to imagine all the earth under the rule of a single God—pending evangelization, of course. But the division of the world that the Flood marked nonetheless persisted, now in the form of a color line dividing those whose biological inheritance is the ownership of property from those who can only *be* property, or at best, sell their labor. As Mayra Rivera (2019) notes, the catastrophe of the Flood for those on the wrong side of this line is its continuity. World-upending events like floods, she argues, are not just apocalyptic bolts hurled from an alien blue, but intimate affairs, working in and on landscapes and those who abide with them.

But in their intimacy, these ongoing catastrophes also offer the opportunity, in Édouard Glissant's (1997: 153) words, of "renew[ing] the visions and aesthetics of relating to the earth" from within, including reworking the relationship between the sacred and the political that the Flood instantiates. For those who lived on Baker's banks during the GLOFs, the efforts of experts to measure, classify, and manage something that they already knew could not be held back reverberated with all the other privations threatening in that moment, shaking the grounds of all manner of settlements. René and Miriam, a couple in their forties, had a ranch just downstream from one of the proposed dam sites. During a February 2011 visit I made to their ranch, the GLOF alert sounded. After the animals had been herded away from the river, we sat drinking wine and listening to the transmission until the wee hours by candlelight, to conserve electricity for the radio. As we waited for news, we gossiped about how affected families, including René's own, were responding to HidroAysén's maneuvers, which were intensifying as the date of the decision on the project approached. René, the only one of six siblings who continued to ranch, was firmly opposed to the project. His father had "made" the property we were on, and René wanted to defend this inheritance until the day he died. But some of his sisters wanted to sell, complicating his plans. They could not talk about the dams with Miriam's family, since René had mortally offended her sister's husband, an HidroAysén supporter, by saying he was not entitled to opine about the project because his father had fecklessly sold the family's land. Miriam felt that the company had "bought" people's silence: most of Cochrane did not like the project, but people were afraid to lose the material benefits the company was providing. Every hour, these ruminations were interrupted by updates from the municipality about the rising Cachet. At the end of one update, the official at the other end of the transmission asked peremptorily, "*¿Está entendido?*" (Is that understood?), and Miriam snapped back, although not over the radio itself, "*¡No somos redondos!*" (We're not idiots!).

The flood did not arrive until the next day, and then with less force than anticipated. In our sector, at some distance from the Colonia, the Baker was just a little higher and muddier than normal. But Miriam's brother, who managed a property farther upstream—called the Island because the river surrounds

it—was having a hard time keeping his animals safe. We heard his voice over the radio with some frequency. At one point he asked the municipality if anyone had flown over the Cachet to see where its levels were. The official on the other end of the line began to provide a lengthy technical explanation of the GLOF, but Miriam's brother cut him short with an irritation that echoed his sister's: "I know how the whole drainage thing works. I am out on the land [*en terreno*]. It's much better than being where you are, in town." Such irritations marked a growing sense that the kingdom that the radio was supposed to mediate was withdrawing from reach.

But in withdrawing, it also opened up the kingdom to the mysterious agencies of the river and their refusal to seek permission. The 'ripple of eschatology'—to paraphrase Martin Buber (1967: 139)—that the GLOF represented framed privation as a prophetic call to action. The dances in which "Loco Loco" featured so prominently mounted a response to this call. Love, the song's chorus tells us, is a watery entity, and thus a theopolitical one: we can only have it—and we cannot do without it—by relinquishing our hold on it. When the dancers moved together to the insistent command that water must flow, they opened themselves to this love and the musical communion with the river as well as their own wandering gaucho past that it offered. This communion was not the ground from which the uprising sprang, but it was the matrix within which the Baker could live, and in which its life could rise up in the body of those with whom it shared ground into something unstoppable.

Conclusion

When HidroAysén was finally rejected, at a meeting of a special committee of ministers convened by Bachelet, one of three factors the committee cited was the project's failure to account for the GLOF. Given that PSR had long raised this objection to no avail, it is hard not to see the GLOF's sudden relevance as a cynical ministerial grasp at any auditable straw to justify what was ultimately a political decision. But perhaps we can also see it as a sign that the Baker's flows managed to reach all the way to Santiago, and that Santiago's *señores* had taken note, for perhaps the first time in the history of modern Chile, of the river's unstoppableity.

Valentina Napolitano (2016) calls the Catholic Church a 'passionate machine', an ethical and political subject that, like water itself and often through the medium of water, mediates the boundary between the life of creation and its Creator by propelling and shaping affects. With the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis (2015) articulated the problem of climate change to the workings of this machine. At the encyclical's core is the theology of Creation, which holds that every creature is endowed by God with

its own purpose and given into the care of humans. As His gift to us, “the entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God” (ibid.: 61). But as anthropologists know, gifts, even those most lovingly given, compel a return. For Francis, our special purpose not just as Catholics but as humans, who are formed in God’s own image and possessed of the inalienable dignity that this mimesis evidences, is to defend and develop “our common home” (ibid.: 12).

Hailed as an ecumenical text and taken as an inspiration by post-secular theorists like Latour, *Laudato Si* is also a reassertion of the sovereignty of the Church over life itself. But we need not concede this claim to explore its ramifications. Perhaps it is less the Church’s apocalyptic enjoinders than its complex mediations, acting even in such improbable spaces as late-night dances, that provide tools for confronting our current crisis. If, as is so often said, we can only imagine the end of capitalism as the end of the world, then those mediations can help pull these horizons apart. Water can and should be life, but it can only live if we are prepared to love its uncontainability.

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Notes

1. The debates raging around this term and alternatives to it lie outside the scope of this article.
2. Text taken from field notes. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

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