"Estampa que se recorta en el gris del tiempo":[1] The Weather as Protagonist in Songs About the Patagonian Sheepherder

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"Have you visited the Ovejero yet?" was a question I heard frequently in my first few months of living in Punta Arenas, Chile, one of Patagonia's southernmost cities. A fixture on one of the city's main boulevards, the bronze statue by Germán Montero Carvallo features a sheepherder driving a flock of sheep with the help of his trusty pup, his bronze horse trailing behind him. The man leans intensely forward as his poncho flies back behind him, a perpetual headwind etching an earnest, determined grimace on his face.

Figure 1 / El Monumento al Ovejero (1943-1944), Punta Arenas, Chile © Micah MacAllen, CC-BY-SA 2.0

Based on the poem "El ovejero de mi tierra" by José Grimaldi Acotto (1911-1992), the "Monumento al Ovejero" exists as just one artistic representation of the shepherd everyman. Folk-inspired songs like "Corazón de escarcha" and "El ovejero" reflect the poem's original

1. Lyrics from "El ovejero".

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sentiment and expand the lore around the ovejero figure. These songs present the ovejero's work as being in constant contact with nature (Livacic 1994), developing regional identity around life within the challenging subpolar climate of Punta Arenas (Simeone 2017). The Patagonian climate features heavily in these representations of the ovejero, with the original poem (Grimaldi 2008)[2] stating:

Original:	*English translation:*
Es el símbolo viviente	[The ovejero] is the living symbol
del empuje y la paciencia	of energy and patience
frente al viento que lo curte	in the face of the wind that tempers him
y al silencio que lo aprieta...	and the silence that confronts him...
No le teme a las lloviznas	He does not fear the mists
ni a los fríos que lo queman.	or the cold that burns him.

This description, along with the hunched posture of the ovejero statue pushing against the wind, demonstrates the situatedness of this "hombre de campo" (Simeone 2017) within his climate, suggesting that his relationship to it serves as a key aspect of ovejero representations. With that said, the ovejero is canonically a masculine-coded figure, which makes his embodiment of man vs. nature narratives even more literal.

In this essay, I reflect on the disjunct and overlapping ways in which we might read the ovejero's relation to climate within sonic contexts. First, I analyze the songs "Corazón de escarcha" and "El ovejero" through a traditional, anthropocentric lens. I demonstrate how, in this ovejero-centric reading of the songs, the ovejero's relationship to the climate serves as an embodiment of frontier nostalgia. I then juxtapose that study with an analysis that takes climate itself as a main actor, employing Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobject (2012; 2013) to highlight issues of scale beyond human conceptions of gender and place. By bringing these two perspectives into dialogue, I explore how human acoustemological practices around weather sounding can reflect gendered and scalar value systems. These overlapping and contradictory interpretations of the songs also show that decentering the human can reconfigure understandings of sonic phenomena to include massive space-time scales.[3]

Weather and masculinity in "Corazón de escarcha" and "El ovejero"

As I will demonstrate in the song case studies, I see the ovejero's relationship to Patagonian weather elements as embodying masculinities as a function of frontier nostalgia.[4] Laura Ogden

2. Original poem published *c*.1923.

3. This essay does not suggest a singular methodology for representing or relating to more-than-human entities; rather I embrace the tangled nature of anthropocentric and ecocentric worldviews. I take inspiration here from ecofeminist theorists such as Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Vinciane Despret, and the Turba Tol Hol Hol Tol project (https://turbatol.org/).

4. Ogden describes the frontier in this way: "We tend to think of the frontier as a successional geospatial boundary—an imaginary fault line integral to the apparatus of settler colonialism and related modes of extractive territoriality. Accordingly, environmental politics at the frontier enable, even encourage, a radical transformation of life into resources, property, and the potential for a different settler future ('striking it rich', 'the American dream', and so forth), even in the contexts of environmental conservation. Yet, contemplating the world's end through the lens of the frontier has taught me that the frontier is not only a territorial project but also a temporality, a way of experiencing and knowing time and history" (2023, 311).

calls frontier nostalgia "a highly selective form of historical memory" which reflects colonial yearning for a past form of territory that the yearners themselves have transformed (2023).[5] Pursell and Hogan (2008), Slotkin (1981), and many others have discussed how nostalgia for historical iterations of landscape can translate into the construction of related masculinities and value systems. Accordingly, they show how the nature-culture divide of the Modern production of nature (Smith 1990) quite literally engages a man-versus-nature politics.

With that said, the ovejero is canonically a masculine-coded figure, which makes his embodiment of man versus nature narratives all the more literal. This is clear in literature about the closely-related gaucho figure, who often represents a stoic masculine archetype (Peluffo 2013) and whose main work involves the domestication of nature (Caggiano 2018). In her examination of gaucho literature, Josefina Ludmer highlights the masculine nationalism of the gaucho: "The written voice of the gaucho defines itself as a 'man' facing the foreign 'woman,' and, moreover, 'bitch'; his country is no more than the masculine member" (2002, 35). Accordingly, the gaucho also serves as a symbol within a restorative nostalgia framework (Boym 2002). Svetlana Boym defines restorative nostalgia as concerning itself with the re-creation of the past, often coming in the form of religious and political ideologies. Symbols and origin stories form its foundations, and practitioners of restorative nostalgia frame their understandings as "truth" or "tradition" rather than a type of nostalgia. The gaucho both exists as a symbol for the Argentinian state and represents the Argentinian pastoral ideal.

In contrast with the gaucho, the ovejero does not carry such militaristic implications, but the ovejero similarly serves as a masculine icon of regionalist, rural pride.[6] And in the dearth of in-depth studies of the ovejero figure, comparisons with the gaucho can prove generative even as the figures differ in a number of ways. Nevertheless, Grimaldi specifically defines the ovejero in opposition to similar solitary herding figures in his poem where we might usually suspect frontier nostalgia:

Original:	*English translation:*
No es el gaucho de la pampa,	He is not the gaucho of the grasslands,
ni el 'cow boy' de la pradera,	nor the cowboy of the prairies,
ni es el huaso, ni es el charro,	nor the huaso, nor the charro,
el ovejero de mi tierra.	the sheepherder of my land.

Grimaldi follows this distinction with a description of the climatic context of the ovejero (specifically referencing wind, cold, and rain), suggesting that this distinguishes him from his solitary masculine counterparts. In both "Corazón de escarcha" and "El ovejero," the harsh Patagonian climate simultaneously alienates the protagonist and makes his profession laudable—worth singing about, for musicians such as Willy Bascuñán, Pedro Messone, Tito Barrientos, and Chilote Campos, among others.

5. Ogden's study is especially relevant given the context of her work on agricultural colonialism in Tierra del Fuego (southern Patagonia).

6. While this study does not go into detail about nationalist archetypes, it is worth noting that both Pedro Messone (performer of the version of "El ovejero" referenced in this article) and Willy Bascuñán (songwriter of "El ovejero") were adherents of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorial regime from 1973-1990. Other scholars have shown how el huaso, the central Chilean cowboy, and his associated dance (cueca) was coopted by the Pinochet administration as a symbol of nationalist pride (Carreño Bolívar 2010; Rojas Sotoconil 2009). Accordingly, similar nationalist masculinities may be at play in Messone and Bascuñán's portrayal of the closely-related ovejero.

A standard anthropocentric reading of "Corazón de escarcha" provides a valuable site for examining the ovejero's embodiment of frontier masculinities. On multiple occasions, I heard this song by Chilote Campos and Tito Barrientos referred to as "the unofficial regional anthem of Magallanes".[7] The waltz – the inspiration for a 2024 film adaptation and multiple theatrical adaptations – tells the story of an unnamed ovejero working in Tierra del Fuego who falls in love with the daughter of his employer. Much to the young couple's dismay, the owner of the estancia disapproves of the relationship due to the protagonist's low socioeconomic status. The young sheepherder desperately tries his luck at gold mining to improve his position, but he ends up only with frozen hands. Eventually, the father gives in, and the couple share true love's kiss.

Throughout "Corazón de escarcha," the ovejero is defined by his relation to the climate—both literally and metaphorically. The first two lines describe his isolated existence using language related to temperature: "Corazón de escarcha/se fue de la estancia/fría la mirada/frío el corazón." The frozenness of his heart and gaze, and later his hands, distinguishes his description from that of his feminine counterpart. She, on the other hand, is described in terms of flourishing within her ecosystem—she is always found within the gardens and was raised with the sea rocking her cradle. The wind (a panteonero) ultimately brings the disparate parties together by changing the favor of the "patrón," the ovejero's employer. When the ovejero and his lover unite, the snow signals a change in the climate of their relationship.

Recordings of the song demonstrate a dedication to the sonic performance of nostalgic frontier masculinities. Most obviously, almost all available recordings of the song are sung by baritone or tenor leads. While this reflects the demographic landscape of Chilean folk-inspired performers in the latter half of the 20th century (Rojas Sahurie 2022), I also view it as a commitment to a hypermasculine representation of the ovejero. In a 2024 recording by Punta Arenas ensemble 7 de Julio, the baritone vocalists sing in full-throated, vibrato-laden unison over undulating alto harmonies. This style calls back to Héctor Pavez's well-known recording from 1969, in which he sings with a brash chest voice. Both groups feature sharp, staccato figures in the accordion accompaniment—a detail that adds a touch of textural sharpness, or rather, iciness.
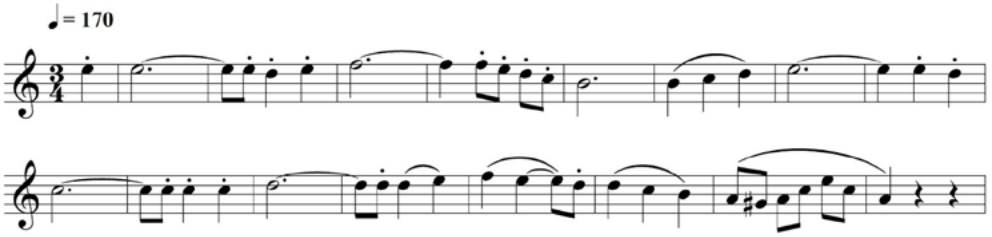
Figure 2 / Staccato figures played by the accordion in the opening measures of "Corazón de escarcha" as recorded by Agrupación Musical 7 de Julio (2024).

While "Corazón de escarcha" tends toward climate metaphor and relation with specific humans, "El ovejero," written by Willy Bascuñán, defines the ovejero's climate world through

7. Magallanes refers to Chile's southernmost administrative region, Magallanes y la Antártica Chilena.

his relationship with more-than-human entities in the face of separation from society. The song describes the ovejero leaving the city, working with his horse and dogs to care for his sheep in the accumulating snow. Bascuñán paints a bleak picture of the ovejero—he trudges on his "blanco camino" ("[snowy] white path") through the "gris del tiempo" ("gray weather"). In the compassionless wind, his hopes and dreams die of cold along with his sheep.

In a recording of "El ovejero" by Pedro Messone, the minimalist walking bass line reflects the simplicity of the ovejero's existence, mirroring the monotony of riding a horse across the vast pampa. The song opens with a whistled descant, a nod to the ovejero's whistle to his sheepdog. As the lyrics discuss the wind's lack of compassion, the background tenor vocals move to an undulating figure in parallel fourths and fifths, an onomatopoeic representation of wind moving across the pampa (see transcription below):

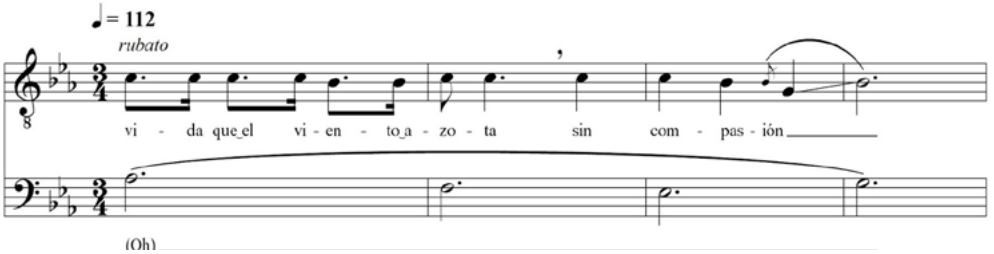

Figure 3 / Minimalist tenor background vocals mimic the sound of the howling wind.

In this representation of the ovejero, the positioning of the human within an exclusively more-than-human context evokes the masculine-coded "lone wolf" trope. Reflecting Barkman and Guerra's description of the gaucho, Messone paints a "romantic image of man-in-and-of-nature" who spends a great deal of time alone (2023). The foregrounding of climate elements in sonic and lyric content suggests that the harshness of weather precludes him from contact with other humans, forcing him to rely on his dog and horse for support. The wind that "azota sin compasión" ("batters without compassion") molds his physical appearance as well, necessitating his iconic "botas, sombrero y poncho" ("boots, wide-brimmed hat, and shawl"). Overall, the song underscores an individualistic, masculine-coded mode of relationality with acutely hyperlocal weather elements of snow and wind.

In both songs, frontier nostalgia constructs masculinity by framing the ovejero as a kind of climate conqueror. This process bears a similarity to the exceptionalism described by Slotkin and Pursell's study of Alaskan (United States frontier) masculinities, where notions of wilderness and harsh climate "are almost immediately layered with nostalgic references to the pioneer past as a time of triumph in a struggle against nature" (2009, 193). Accordingly, an interpretation of the ovejero as a lone wolf who is "en penosa marcha"[8] ("on a painful march") fighting against the wind bears colonial undertones. In turn, these narratives tie him to linear, anthropocentric ways of understanding history and constructing the Patagonian frontier.

8. Lyrics from "Corazón de escarcha."

The climate hyperobject in "Corazón de escarcha" and "El ovejero"

Alternatively, this interpretation of a masculine nostalgia is complicated if we consider the protagonist to be not the ovejero, but the climate itself. One way to do this is to understand climate as a hyperobject, a concept developed by Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2012) and *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013). Morton defines hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (2013, 1). He describes hyperobjects as "viscous," showing how they are unavoidably attached to the beings they are involved with; he also describes them as being nonlocal and as operating on temporalities unfamiliar to human conceptions of space-time (2013, 1). Accordingly, he considers climate a hyperobject—it exists with or without human perception on a geological scale outside the bounds of human comprehension. While humans can feel the sensation of sleet hitting their faces, they aren't able to sense The Climate in itself (Morton 2013, 76).

In the case of "Corazón de escarcha," the climate exists independently of the ovejero, but the ovejero's existence as described in the song is completely dependent on the climate. His profession exists because of Tierra del Fuego's apt weather patterns for raising sheep. His missions to pan or dig for gold are foiled by the ice's hardness, chilled deep by long seasons of below-freezing temperatures: "Fue a buscar el oro en penosa marcha/y oro a manos llenas escarcha encontró" ("He went to search for gold in a painful march/and gold in handfuls of frost he found"). And perhaps the patrón's change in heart is more a change in brain chemistry, prompted by the fluctuating air pressure of "el panteonero" (a strong Patagonian wind) or snowmelt from "el ventisquero" (a high-altitude snowmass). The climate hyperobject sticks to the ovejero even as it sticks to sheep living fifty years after him, or now. Its atemporality renders nostalgia irrelevant in the absence of a linear timescale.

With the climate object at the center of the narrative, we can also hear the song differently. For example, we do not necessarily hear the belting baritones as having an indexical relationship with performed masculinity. Instead, we can reflect on how the baritone's vocal folds react to the humidity level in Héctor Pavez's recording of the tune. Or, in a live performance by 7 de Julio, we can consider how the vibration of stomping winter boots through the dance floor exists as a result of the climate shaping human behavior over centuries.

In "El ovejero," changing the protagonist from the ovejero to the climate hyperobject shifts the scale of the song from a hyperlocal anthropocentrism to multispecies ecosystemic collaboration. Most notably, we can see the ways in which the subpolar climate provides the preconditions for interspecies collaboration within and beyond the sheepherding industry. The temperate weather creates optimal conditions for large swaths of pampa to grow and feed "ese piño eterno" ("that eternal flock"). To care for his sheep and ensure his own survival, the ovejero enlists the services of horses and dogs, whose ability to efficiently navigate the pampa make it possible to work outside of the city (Punta Arenas) which "ya va quedando atrás" ("is already being left behind").

Ultimately, the climate makes the sheepherding industry possible and dictates how it is carried out across species. The whistles in the introduction of the song, indexical of the ovejero-sheepdog communication, make these collaborative processes audible, allowing us to hear what Yamin and Rudge have called "situated becomings" (2024). As listeners have been encouraged by Ochoa (2016), Mundy (2018), McGhee (2024), Feld (2017), Eidsheim

(2015), and many other recent scholars, conceiving of the climate hyperobject allows us to hear processes and ecosystems rather than simply sounds' sources.

However, it is not just sheepherding in Patagonia, but sheepherding in all its variations in other locations throughout time. Morton reminds us that "[t]he ecological thought that thinks hyperobjects is not one in which individuals are embedded in a nebulous overarching system, or conversely, one in which something vaster than individuals extrudes itself into the temporary shapes of individuals" (19). Accordingly, the climate hyperobject at the center of "El ovejero" draws our attention to the interconnectedness of sensory experience and interspecies co-reliance on a global scale. It complicates frontier nostalgia and its associated masculinities by outscaling human thought, sensory experiences, and values systems.

Escuchando con el ovejero (Listening with the *ovejero*)

By placing anthropocentric interpretations of "Corazón de escarcha" and "El ovejero" alongside ones that center the climate hyperobject, I hope to encourage reflections on how plural modes of meaning-making and sensing can reveal novel configurations and relations between humans and more-than-human entities. In this case, the nexus between climate, gender, and issues of scale reveal that the ovejero figure simultaneously embodies the fragmented colonialism of frontier nostalgias and radical relationalities with non-human actors.

Listening through the climate hyperobject requires a modicum of humility for the human listener. Morton writes:

> Every aspect of hyperobjects reinforces our particular lameness with regard to them. The viscosity that glues us to the hyperobject forces us to acknowledge that we are oozing, suppurating with nonhuman beings: mercury, radioactive particles, hydrocarbons, mutagenic cells, future beings unrelated to us who also live in the shadow of hyperobjects. The nonlocality of hyperobjects scoops out the foreground–background manifolds that constitute human worlds. The undulating temporality that hyperobjects emit bathes us in a spatiotemporal vortex that is radically different from human-scale time. The phasing of hyperobjects forcibly reminds us that we are not the measure of all things, as Protagoras and correlationism promise (2013, 197).

In the context of humans listening to music and sound, we might consider how these microscopic, "oozing" nonhuman beings within us impact material processes of transduction. Bacteria and earwax–influenced by the climate hyperobject–modulate sonic pitch, loudness, and timbre. In an ironic twist, then, the hyperobject (which outscales us) brings human attention to nonhuman entities that humans perceive as minuscule. This process of reconfiguring power and agency can serve to create more ecosystemic awareness in the human listener. Additionally, the hyperobject highlights how interaction with the nonhuman shapes multiplicitous sensory human experiences of climate and sound.

Nevertheless, a focus on the nonhuman's impact on the human implies a recentering of the human. In her 2019 book *Living as a Bird*,[9] Vinciane Despret urges humans to explore

9. I am referring to the 2021 English translation by Helen Morrison of Despret's 2019 book *Habiter en oiseau*.

multispecies ontologies on their own terms. She writes, "Our task should be to multiply worlds rather than to reduce them to our own" (28). This is easier said than done—after all, humans can't not anthropomorphize. Nevertheless, even as small an intervention as decentering human actors in musical analysis can further multiply worlds. As we continue multiplication through cosounding, cohabitating, learning, we dilute the colonial and totalizing narratives that have pervaded many human perspectives, creating opportunities for generative relationships with more-than-human entities and cultures of mutual care.

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