Mapuche dreams

The following is a transcript of an interview conducted by Collin Xia with Mapuche scholar and activist Yaroslava Avila Montenegro

C: Before today's discussion can begin, I want to acknowledge that I am currently situated in Tkaronto, an area traditionally cared for by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. Today it is home to many First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities. I want to acknowledge the current treaty holders are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and that this territory is subject to the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement that we are all implicated in, and has yet to be honoured.

Before I begin my questions, please introduce yourself briefly and the work that you do within academia and beyond.

Y: (…) my name is Yaroslava Avila Montenegro, I am a Mapuche organizer, and activist born and raised here in Tkaronto, Huron-Wendat, Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee Confederacy territory. And I am the daughter of Mapuche refugees from Wallmapu, so-called Chile. I have always organized on the topic of Indigenous rights, economic and social justice here in the city. Currently, I am a part of the Women's Coordinating Committee for a Free Wallmapu, which deals with Mapuche land rights in so-called Southern Chile and helping Mapuche political prisoners; to be able to raise awareness on the issues that are happening within our territories and connect them to the issues of land back here on Turtle Island, work that is extremely important to develop between our nations. That's the organization that I have been a part of since I was quite young with a group of elders and kin. Doing this work and pushing this narrative out to an Anglo audience, translating the statements of our people, as well as being able to make those connections has been an honour. I am really happy and proud of that work. I am really honoured to be invited here today by CERLAC, having worked with them quite closely in the last year.

Professionally I am currently the Interim Operations Manager at Indigenous Climate Action, which is an organization based out of Turtle Island that focuses on Indigenous climate initiatives. Being able to raise our nations here on Turtle Island and being able to confront and deal with ongoing extractivism that's happening on the territory has been a beautiful experience, and I'm really proud of being able to be part of that. I am currently also doing my doctoral degree. Currently, I'm a doctoral researcher in the Department of Political Science at York University. I focus on state securitization and criminalization of social and Indigenous liberation movements both here on Turtle Island and Abya Yala, which is what we call South America. My other areas of research include exploring Indigenous thought and politics in connection with radical socio-political thought: Marxism, post-colonialism etcetera. As well as exploring the intersection of international political economy, hegemony, and contested politics. That is really what I do in a nutshell.

C: That is really expansive and it's all grounded in supporting Indigenous rights, land back, and decolonization. I wonder if there was a moment where this work began with you, or has it been a

part of your life throughout?

Y: I think it's been part of my life having grown up as a daughter of Mapuche refugees coming from so-called Chile and that is something you grow up with. I didn't grow up with my traditions, that was something I learned along the way. (…) from social movements that had been developing on the territory and then realizing our connections to the land as well as our family histories associated with the land and the communities. Growing up here on Turtle Island, I was completely separated from my extended family because of the political situation in so-called ChileComing in from that history it's always been part of our reality here, both in our actions locally and our connections back home. That profound sense of justice has always been the guiding principle in that way.

C: Absolutely…I have always been interested in how other scholars navigate their place within the institution where their presence is inherently oppositional. Do you have any thoughts on this dilemma?

Y: So this is something I struggle with a lot in academia because of my particular discipline. I'm doing my research in Political Science and my discipline is notoriously colonial and capitalist in its approach to world issues. I come from a lived experience that is quite radical—anti-colonial, anti-imperialist,—coming into the discipline with that framework is a challenge. It is something that I still struggle with a lot, even though I have had the privilege of advancing quite a bit into the discipline. Being able to do my doctoral degree, I'm very grateful for that, but it's always been a struggle. Especially with the material aspects of being from a working-class family as well as being refugees from so-called Latin America, Abya Yala; it's difficult to be able to take on academia and put your foot in the door within a discipline that is designed to push you aside. I am really lucky to be at York! Initially, I was taking doctoral courses at other institutions across the province and found there to be such a lack of accommodation and huge disparities. In conjunction with my working-class background, having to deal with student debt, class oppression, as well as identifying as Indigenous in these spaces was a challenge when broader structures are meant to keep us out. That is something I've struggled with. That said, part of the reason that I wanted to go to academia was to take some of the knowledge we learn in these spaces and bring it back to our communities in order to build counter-hegemonic structures. Especially with political science, you get an understanding of the logics of power, ruling class narratives, as well as other kinds of hegemonic colonial narratives that guide a lot of the structures of society. Being able to understand them and reinterpret them to empower our own communities has always been my goal. Not that we want to integrate the space given to us by institutions of power, but rather using that knowledge as a tool to dismantle them —this is one of the bigger reasons why I want to be in academia. Those tools are important; we need to know what we're up against.

C: I think that strategy has been tried and tested for centuries. Learning settler structures and knowledge systems has been integral to Indigenous resilience.

The theme of our inaugural issue is disruption and surveillance. As an Indigenous activist and scholar, your livelihood is oppositional to the settler project and you live under carceral systems, including the university. How would you describe your life under anti-Indigenous carceral systems, being both invisible and hypervisible at the same time?

Y: So I'll start from a broader sense and boil it down to the individual. I think our individual experiences are important but they are connected to a broader structure that we need to dismantle. From the perspective of histories of surveillance, histories of the carceral settle state, my nation, the Mapuche, has been fighting for decades—centuries, really—to take back the land. After 300 years of war with the Spanish, the Mapuche Nation remained an autonomous region in the 16th and 17th Centuries. It was only at the end of the Pacification of Araucania (i.e. Wallmapu) in the late 19th Century, when the Chilean state militarily occupied our ancestral territory. During the second half of the 20th Century, there was a period

of great revival, especially in the 60s and 70s with the period of the Allende government at its peak, with the reclamation of Indigenous land helped by the Agrarian Reform. After this booming period, much of the movement went underground in the mid-70s due to the dictatorship. But having lived through that tormentous period, our people carry that history with them. With the transition to democracy in the early 90s, we see the Mapuche nation taking the reins of our own destiny and reclaiming the land in a different way than had been done previously. In the past, our struggles were interconnected with different social movements such as with Marxist revolutionary organizations that were active in the territory. During the transition to democracy that shifts toward a specific liberation of our own peoples with our own identities and cosmologies. This comes with a great cost as state repression becomes increasingly targeted toward indigenous nations and their mobilizations for Land Back. It has led to 20 years' worth of incarceration under the anti-terrorism law in Chile, which is unheard of in the Americas. There is a certain degree of understanding in other settler-colonial states that the reappropriation and reclamation of ancestral land are not charged under terrorism legislation (despite being heavily prosecuted by the state through other means), and yet the Mapuche have been charged under these laws continuously as a legacy of the dictatorship for decades. Part of the work that we do here is to expose these Human Rights violations and connect them to the criminalization suffered by Indigenous Nations under the colonial system here. Locally, we see Indigenous communities criminalized for reclaiming the land and fighting against pipelines. Within the last 30 years, there has been a huge spark within Indigenous movements within Abya Yala but also Turtle Island. At the same time, we see the deliberation of security and intelligence ops like that of Operation SITKA with the RCMP surveilling Indigenous communities protesting pipelines expanding into Mi'kmaqi territories. As organizers, exposing these conditions makes us hypervisible to the state. Our organization was very vocal and visible throughout the late-2000s, in solidarity with folks from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, which is about 60 km west of Toronto. During this time in the late-2000s, there was a land back reclamation movement in 2006 that we heavily supported. We interacted with many communities across the so-called province and were able to help different Indigenous communities thrive against state repression, and act in solidarity with the Six Nation's reclamation efforts in Kahnonstaton specifically. That work led to organizing in different communities throughout the territory. It came to a big halt in the summer of 2010, during the G20 summit. Our organization was organizing a large event to connect the issue of land back to folks across the territories from Secwepemc in so-called British Columbia, all the way to the east toward Mi'kmaqi. The event was called Confront the Invasion.

We were there to denounce the exploitation of the land and the people. The fact is that our communities in the Global South, in Abya Yala, are being exploited by the very states that we live in the North. These governments have vested interests in maintaining the social and economic structures of neoliberalism in our territories to further exploit them. We made a stand against this and many of us had to pay the consequences, which was really traumatic as an organizer, seeing the aftermath of the G20 and the unravelling of the largest police and intelligence operation in Canadian history. It sent a signal on how the Canadian colonial state views Indigenous solidarity activism, the primary targets were those of us that were more ingrained in the Indigenous organizing at the time. You see ricochets of that in other operations like operation SITKA, which inspired much of my own research into the field of Critical Surveillance Studies on how states view our movements, how they disrupt them, and what can we learn from these instances, as traumatic as they are, to be able to build better-equipped movements in the future.

C: It's incredible that you were able to take that experience and try to turn it into best practices. I found it interesting how systems of surveillance have followed you.

Y: Well, we're in the belly of the beast, I think that's the thing people tend to forget. This is the centre of where these systems come from. For example, we have the bloody history of the resi-

dential school system here on Turtle Island that people are still reeling from. We are seeing mass graves that are being pulled out of Indigenous territory. These are the people fighting for the territory firsthand, they're land defenders on the ground and have to deal with the continuation of this repression. These systems are made here and exported abroad. What happened to my people during the dictatorship, that was exported from here. They were exported or at least approved by people here. The tortures in our territories were trained by people here. Within my discipline, we focus on authoritarianism and democracy as polar opposites. In reality, sometimes they sustain each other in that way. On our territory, that's exactly what happened. There's this whole notion of individual rights and freedom of speech but that is contingent on the exploitation of the frontier in the South. It's the same machine, taking on different ideological forms of conditioning. It's the same logic of expropriation, capitalism, and colonialism intertwined. I don't see them as separate.

C: I really like thinking about this frontier, whether it manifests in Indigenous bodies or in an entire continent. It brings me to my next question. Many people think of land through notions of property and conquest, rendering it something that ought to be owned and conquered. They are not aware of the ethical relationships with land that are possible, thinking of land as more-than-human kin. As a Mapuche person and child of refugees on Turtle Island, what is your relationship to land?

Y: It's a difficult question to ask in terms of my personal relationship to the land because of how displaced myself and my broader family are in terms of where we are from. we live that displacement on a daily basis. This idea of exile that happened in the 70s onward… Even though you are technically allowed to go back to the land, there are so many barriers that impede you from doing so. You also have a life on these territories, you are also connected with the folks on these territories. What I would say on a grander scale is that a connection to the land is what guides our nations to take back our land and reconstruct our Indigenous nations, our governance structures, cosmologies, and being able to connect our lands to that project. One of the ways that I can do that here is through solidarity and empowerment of Indigenous peoples here to do that for themselves. For me, the primary goal is being able to empower Indigenous nations to take back their land and have that kinship, pushing back on the colonialism that exists here in so-called Canada. That's the relationship that I have to the land. Respecting the traditions of the folks here and helping empower them in solidarity any way that I can.

C: That's also a responsibility as visitors or guests on this land to empower Indigenous people, our hosts, to reclaim that relationship that might have been severed over centuries of colonialism. In CERLAC and the university as a whole, there is a lack of Indigenous voices. What is your vision for your upcoming workshop with CERLAC? And what does the community need to learn or unlearn?

Y: In terms of the workshop itself, I'm still trying to figure out what I would like to do, in terms of the broader priorities and the specifics of the workshop. Ideally, I want to invite Indigenous voices from Abya Yala and connect with Indigenous peoples here. I think it's important to understand the perspectives of Indigenous peoples locally, which is connected to our own struggles back in the South. These struggles are not disconnected. This stolen land all the way from so-called Alaska, all the way down to Patagonia so to speak. We have to understand that these are all connected, that this is the same struggle.
In uplifting Indigenous voices, we need to deconstruct what Latin America means and that we are not a homogenous mass. We are not connected to our particular nation-states, and that there are debates on recognition and self-determination. So, for example in Quyasuyu, what is today Bolivia, these conversations veer towards pluri-nationalism, even though there are questions amongst Indigenous groups on whether that is the right way to go about decolonizing. In my territories, this debate leans towards self-determination, to become autonomous from the occupying colonial state but also to reconstruct our nations, and what does that look like. In the

context of Latin America, especially considering the Latin American Left that tends to focus on elections within the bounds of the state, we need to have these debates and difficult conversations.

In terms of CERLAC, we can begin by having these debates and bringing these perspectives to the table and have folks decide for themselves.

C: I am interested in how you see Black people in this conversation. Black people as settlers, Black people as Indigenous peoples, and Black people as enslaved peoples who were trafficked here as well.

Y: First of all, I don't think we should consider Black people as settlers on this land. It's something that needs to be said outright. As displaced peoples forced to be here, I don't consider them settlers. We need to decolonize our thinking in that way. There are tensions between Indigenous communities and Black communities here and in Abya Yala. That was the whole project of colonialism from that start, being able to distinguish our different so-called races and split us up and divide us between groups of people we could very well ally ourselves with for our liberation. That allyship is really important as well as revisiting the historical connections that Indigenous nations have made to the project of Black liberation as a decolonial project. One thing that comes to mind is George Manuel, who was prominent in the Red Power Movement and wrote the book on the Fourth World, which furthered understandings of Indigenous positionalities unto colonialism and imperialism worldwide. He also visited Africa in the 1960s and 70s, when it was experiencing a wave of decolonization. He was able to connect anti-colonial struggles between Africa and Turtle Island. People don't often think about these histories when we think about alliances. We need to look at what these alliances historically looked like to build from that. I believe it was in Mozambique that George Manuel went to start this project and it really builds into this idea at the time, in the 1960s and 70s, this idea of Third World liberation struggles and trying to encompass different anti-colonial movements around the world. While it was very class-based, I think we can take that idea of connectivity and push further as colonized peoples who have to deal with the wrath of both capitalism and colonialism on our home territories, having been displaced from our territories, having to live here and learn from those instances. We need to see how we can build that kind of solidarity locally from our differences and have a basic understanding of what our unity can mean in terms of building our own liberation struggles. I think that's something we need to explore further. We have the opportunity to be on these territories and make those connections happen.

C: thank you for speaking on the issue of Black positionality on the land. It's something I am still learning about as I navigate my complicity in the settler project. My last question is something you touched on already, which is what is your dream for Abya Yala and Turtle Island as well as what land back means to you?

Y: Within the context of this interview, my dream for Abya Yala and Turtle Island is the liberation of our nations. For me, what that means is looking at decolonialism as anti-capitalism. That is a project that my people have tried to take on. Many of the Land Defenders in Wallmapu, within the Coordinadora Arauco Malleco (the Arauco Malleco Coordinating Committee, CAM) speak specifically to this project of decolonialism from an anti-capitalist perspective. Because we cannot be indigenous nations without land, and the way the land is privatized right now is not our way. That's something we need to highlight. Many times, especially on Turtle Island, decolonialism takes on a neoliberal perspective, based on inclusion into certain categories, job titles, and existing structures that we need to dismantle. Envisioning this liberation project through the CAM we would need to focus on the reconstruction of our nations through the productive takeover of our land. In Wallmapu, our people reclaim the territory that is usually in the hands of large landed estate owners (latifundios). For example, many forestry companies have invasive pine plantations on the territory, which is eroding the land. In taking back the territory, we develop what the Mapuche call "productive reclamations" in the which community moves on to reclaimed territory and live off the land, de-

veloping our own production relations as Indigenous peoples on the land. That is something that my people are already doing. One of the things I want to support is the reconstruction of our nations. We don't talk about that enough. There is a lot of talk about recognition, or sometimes the idea that Land Back can somehow be led by state actors. In the experiences of folks from Abya Yala, you can't expect these things to be given, they have to be fought for, which requires a lot of sacrifices. My perspective is that if we want to reach actual liberation, we need to work towards building our own structures, our own governance system, and our own ways of doing things on the land itself. We can bring in other toolkits to build that. For example, I am very socialist. That said, I think of it as a tool in a toolbox to bring to the table rather than the centre of everything. That's what land back means to me, the reconstruction of our nation from the perspective of anti-capitalism. I don't think indigeneity and our cosmology function with capitalism.