



DAMIANA KRYYYGI

A STORY OF DEFIANCE

DECEMBER 19, 2021

GENDER FINALE

ALBA LOUREIRO

GENDER PRAXIS AND
INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

GENDER FINALE

INTRODUCTION



Damiana Kryygi's life was short, intense, and extremely cruel. Captured from the Ybuturuzy Mountain Range Forest in Paraguay, this indigenous child, both alive and dead, was used as an object of scientific investigation. When scientists used experiments to define racial differences, her body was seen as an alien object to demonstrate indigenous communities' supposed primitive, sub-human nature in Latin America. As a female indigenous child, Damiana Kryygi represents the life of countless indigenous people of the Americas who were persecuted, studied, and exposed in the name of scientific racism. But, more uniquely, her life is a symbol of resistance to the scientific narrative--it is a story of defiance to the objectification and hypersexualization of her body and the silencing of her identity. In life and death, Damiana Kryygi is a survivor and a rebel.

This project aims to document her life employing three components: a literature review of existing sources detailing Damiana Kryygi's life, and a story map that visualizes and locates events in her life.

GENDER FINALE

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1900s, Argentina was the center of several anthropometric studies of indigenous bodies. The La Plata Museum of National Sciences offered the ideal setting for scientific experimentation advocated by positivism (Vallejo, 2019). In particular, the use of experiments to study the indigenous body in search of anomalies that could prove racial inferiority compared to white European people. Studies started with Dutch anthropologist Herman Ten Kate who led the first expedition searching for indigenous people in 1893. They collected 300 skulls of indigenous inhabitants of the province of Buenos Aires and Northern Patagonia¹ (p. 57). It continued with an eight-month expedition through Paraguay in 1894, where Ten Kate and French diplomat Charles De la Hitte followed the footprint of the "guayaquíes" people. As De la Hitte described, the guayaquíes represented a subject of study that should be observed, described, and classified before going extinct (as cited in Ballestero, 2013: 101). The latter motivated the third expedition in 1896 that resulted in the captivity of an indigenous Paraguayan child as a human specimen. (Vallejo, 2019, p. 56)

Damiana Kryygi's kidnapping marked the beginning of her life as an object of scientific study. Upon being captured, she was first taken to a church and baptized as Damiana—a process used to normalize indigenous bodies into what was considered real people. She was then taken by Ten Kate, who collected her anthropometric measures to compare her body to those of German girls of the same age. Months later, he returned to the point where the massacre occurred and collected her mother's bones for study. Eventually, in 1897, Ten Kate quit his role and was replaced by Robert Lehmann Nitsche—a German physician and ethnologist. Lehmann Nitsche took over the project and sent Damiana to San Vicente to live with the Korn Family. Damiana grew up there as a maid until puberty when she was obsessively studied again.

Damiana's sexual awakening during puberty ignited Lehmann Nitsche's scientific curiosity. In 1898, she moved to San Vicente in Argentina under the protection of Alejandro Korn, a prominent psychiatrist and philosopher who led the Melchor Romero Neuropsychiatric Hospital. Korn led the Melchor for the next 20 years, pioneering labor therapy in colonies of livestock farming, and became an active provider of indigenous remains to the Museum de la Plata. To the Korn family, Damiana's sexual awakening threatened the uncontrollable reproduction of an entity whose normalcy was still not proven by science (Vallejos, 2019, p. 61). A reason why Lehmann Nitsche found Damiana to be hypersexual, going against the education received at the Korn Family. In 1908, Lehmann Nitsche described Damiana in his notes:

"Her sexual libido manifested itself so alarmingly that all education and admonition by the family proved ineffective. The Indian was absent from the house frequently, sometimes up to three days, in the company of a lover and even poisoned a dog that watched over her room to let the man in. She regarded sexual acts as the most natural thing in the world and indulged in satisfying her desires with the instinctive spontaneity of a naïve being. (Lehmann Nitsche, 1908, p. 92-93)."

Vallegos (2019) explained that the scientific studies forced onto Damiana dehumanized her through obsessive attempts to understand her existence and satisfy a curiosity ignited by her condition as an indigenous female body. Her life prompted questions such as "...where in the brain could the atavistic features of her racial inferiority be found? How could they scientifically explain her unbridled sexuality?" (p. 52). Such concerns surrounding Damiana's sexuality led to Alejandro Korn committing her to the Melchor facility. The goal was to discipline her on moral values while allowing Lehmann Nitsche to advance his studies. While the Korn family hoped to send Damiana to a correctional facility, Damiana passed away only a couple of months after.

In her last 2.5 months alive, Lehmann Nitsche rigorously studied Damiana's body but found no evidence of inferiority. In May of 1907, Lehmann Nitsche started a new anthropometric and photographic study of her body. Besides studying physical features, Lehmann Nitsche was now concerned with explaining Damiana's supposed nymphomaniac behavior. His reports highlight Damiana's impressive ability to speak German and Spanish and her relatively normal physical development compared to the average of European girls. Unsatisfied with the results, Lehmann Nitsche measured her extremities, teeth, skull, face shape and even described her armpit and pubic hair. The study went to such lengths as to describe her breasts and the areolar around her nipples, which he dutifully noted to be "withered and flabby (...) not surprising given the Indian's active sexual life" (Lehmann Nitsche, 1908, p. 93). However, all results challenged the hypothesis of Damiana's inferior race and nymphomania.

The obsessive study of Damiana's body and sexuality is reminiscent of the 19th-century scientific narratives that associated sexual agency with the hyper-sexualization of the black female body. As described in the writing of J.J. Virrey and Georges Cuvier, the black women were seen as possessing a primitive sexual appetite explained by the color and shape of their genitalia (Gilman, 1985). Just as Saartjie Baartman was exhibited as the "Hottentot Venus" in 1810, Damiana's body is photographed, exposed, and studied as a specimen of the indigenous female body. This act replicates efforts to see black women and indigenous women as primitive beings that could not control their sexual desires. As described in Sander Gilman's writings, the black body was set as an icon of deviance and hypersexualization (pg. 213). This tone is consistent in Lehmann Nitsche's hypersexualized descriptions of Damiana's body as an indigenous object of study, just like the Hottentot, and extends well beyond her death.

Damiana's death led to an even more macabre act that decapitated her corpse to study her brain. After being committed to the Melchor Hospital, Damiana contracted tuberculosis and died at age fourteen. Lehmann Nitsche's photographic study is the last evidence recording her life. After her death, her head was decapitated and sent to the Berlin Society of Anthropology in Germany to be studied by the professor of anatomy, Juan (Hans) Virchow. Her body remained in Argentina, where Lehmann Nitsche continued his studies. Virchow eventually published his results in the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory. Damiana's life was silenced until the early 2000s, when it rose to light, exposing a dark history of colonial and imperialistic studies of hundreds of indigenous bodies in Latin America.

Damiana's story became a symbol of restitution of identities and inspired institutional changes at the La Plata Museum of Natural Sciences. Her story came to life in 2005 when Patricia Arenas and Jorge Pinedo led an investigation to reconstruct her biography and find her remains (Arenas y Pinedo, 2005). Supported by GUIAS (University collective researching Social Anthropology), the efforts led to an institutional reform prohibiting the exhibition of human remains at the Museum (Vallejos, 2019). Further studies exposed archives of indigenous portraits and illegal possession of soft tissues of the indigenous leader cacique Inakayal, that should have been restituted to its community. These events led to diplomatic discussions requesting the reconstruction of indigenous identities erased during colonization.

The return of Damiana Kryygi to the Ache Nation exposed the forced invisibility of indigenous communities in Latin America. In 2005, the investigation first found a 20th-century European publication with a skull photograph of Damiana. Coupled with her mother's remains found at the La Plata Museum, these pieces of evidence helped find Damiana's remains in 2007. In May of that year, the University of Natural Science and La Plata Museum began a restitution request to return Damiana's remains to the Ache Nation in Paraguay. On June 10 of 2010, the latter was effective when the Ache community finally buried Damiana's remains and named her "Kryygi," meaning wild armadillo. However, the decapitated head was still missing. It was not until German journalist Heidemarie Boehmecke initiated an investigation to find the remains in her country that the skull was found in the Anthropology Laboratory of the Charité Hospital in Berlin, along with Virchow and Lehmann Nitsche annotations dated back to 1908. Argentinian authorities coordinated the restitution of the skull, which took place on May 4, 2012. These events gave closure to over a century of scientific captivity of this indigenous child.

GENDER FINALE

STORY MAP



SCAN THE ABOVE QR CODE TO ACCESS
THE STORY MAP
or go to <https://arcg.is/1yOXqCl>

I used ArcGIS to create a story map with photographs and locations detailing the life of Damiana Kryygi. Additionally, the platform contains media content including documentaries and music. While you can access the story map online, a hard copy is attached to this document.

GENDER FINALE

REFERENCES

Ballestero, D. (2013). Los espacios de la antropología en la obra de Robert Lehmann Nitsche, 1894-1938. Tesis doctoral. En línea: <<http://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/33505>> [Consultado el 29 de diciembre de 2018].

Fernandez Moujan, Alejandro, and Gema Juárez Allen. (2014). Damiana Kryggi: The Story of an Ache Girl. [Documentary & photographs] Retrieved from: smith.kanopy.com/video/damiana-kryggi

Gilman, Sander. (1985) Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race" Writing, and Difference, pp. 204-242. The University of Chicago Press. Retrieved from: Moodle readings.

Lehmann-Nitsche. (1908) Relevamiento Antropológico de una India Guayaki. *Revista del Museo de la Plata*. Buenos Aires, Argentina. 1908, pp. 91-101. Retrieved from: naturalis.fcnym.unlp.edu.ar/repositorio/_documentos/sipcyt/bfa005046.pdf

Vallejo, Gustavo Gabriel. (2019) "Damiana En La Ciudad De Atenea: Ciencia, Género y Raza En Argentina." in "Las locas: Miradas interdisciplinarias sobre género y salud mental" SEDICI, Editorial De La Universidad Nacional De La Plata (EDULP), 5 Feb. 2021, <http://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/112327>.