Indigenous Transversality in Global Politics

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Abstract

This article examines historical transversal politics in indigenous movements in the Americas and beyond. It argues that contemporary indigenous activism, enacted in multiple political forms, ranging from international governmental organizations to extra-statist indigenous networks, are energized in and through resurgent transversality as a historical spatial condition and a mode of being. In the new global exhilarations a transversal political universe is emerging. This universe works syncretically within the ambit the traditional statist diplomatic regime but is neither subsumed within nor eclipsed by it. Following Michel Foucault on heterotopias, the article argues that indigenous universe exists and works side by side, under and above, in and through the prevailing statist regime yet it preserves a certain transformative, even transgressive, autonomy. In the process, this universe introduces indigeneity as an agent of the political, productive of novel communicative horizons. The article looks into indigenous experiences in modernity as experiences of not simply massive political and economic devastation and cultural displacement, but also centuries-long refusal to be "absorbed" by modernity’s nationalizing and territorializing relations and intuitions anchored in the modern state. Among these institutions are traditional ontologies as political regimes that communicate statist form while excommunicating indigeneity, among others, from the field of political praxis. With this dynamic in mind, a la Armand Mattelart, the article begins to examine indigenous practices that are mobilized (a) to circumvent their excommunication from the political and (b) to communicate indigeneity into global politics as a different ontology of political being and becoming. The article argues that indigenous activisms can be read as critical constructive "engagements" with modernity’s promises and results, in which it is possible to learn limits of the politics, present and future, and offer new insights into how local and global politics, including state-centricity, can be critically and constructively re-envisioned in policy and conduct.

Introduction

The transversal politics in Indigenous movements in the Americas and beyond has been proliferating in multiple political forms. Ranging from international governmental organizations to extra-statist Indigenous networks, Indigenous struggles have energized historical transversality as a viable political universe. This universe works syncretically within the ambit of the traditional statist diplomatic regime but is neither subsumed within nor eclipsed by it. Following Michel Foucault on heterotopias, the article argues that an Indigenous universe exists and works side by side, under and above, in and through the prevailing statist regime, yet preserves a certain transformative, even transgressive, autonomy. In the process, this universe introduces Indigeneity as an agent of the political, productive of novel communicative horizons. The article regards Indigenous experiences in modernity as experiences of not simply massive political and economic devastation and cultural displacement, but also centuries-long refusal to be "absorbed" by modernity’s nationalizing and territorializing relations and intuitions anchored in the modern state. Among these institutions are traditional ontologies as political regimes that communicate statist form while excommunicating Indigeneity, among others, from the field of political praxis. With this dynamic in mind, the article examines Indigenous practices that are mobilized to circumvent their excommunication from the political and to communicate Indigeneity into global politics anew as a different ontology of political life.

In the Beginning.....

Columbus and the succeeding “explorers” wandered into Indigenous spaces already shaped as places in political and cultural terms. Yet, gazing at the unfamiliar from their own historical locations and subjectivities, they registered the new lands and their inhabitants as strange, thereby positioning them as objects of their knowing and ultimately of their conquest. What followed these early encounters was the rise of a matrix of positionality in which “Europe” emerged as the center of the world and the “new” lands as peripheral places exterior to, but still knowable by, Europe. This alignment of positionalities and subjectivities would ultimately empower an ideological strategy that would not only effect a dominant European agency with respect to the Indigenous spaces, but also fuel a wholesale assault on, and even negate altogether, Indigenous agency. From the beginning, European programs and projects were set to conflict with Indigenous civilizational practices.

The hierarchy that emerged in the encounters was not coincidental, but a manifestation of Europe’s rising desire for territorial expansion. When Columbus set sail in 1492, Europe had already burst its bounds in search of new territories and wealth. North and West African Coasts had already been thoroughly “explored” and mapped for future enterprises. Canary Islands were in the
process of being “incorporated” into Europe’s domain against the background of an edict by Pope Nicholas V blessing and empowering Christian kings to enslave and seize the lands of “all Saracens and pagans whatsoever...and wheresoever.”4 Issued originally to spur European control of the Mediterranean Sea and the trade routes through the Middle East, the Papal Edict represented the confluence of proto-modern political and economic interests, though provisionally couched in the still-dominant religious discourse in the early Renaissance. As Francis Jennings put it, the European Renaissance also ushered in a European Reconnaissance driven by political-economic forces. Not surprisingly, the royal contract Columbus signed with Queen Isabella contained articles almost exclusively regulating economic interests in congruence with the financial needs of a political regime in ascendancy.5 In short, Europe’s Reconnaissance was envisioned primarily as an extractive and exploitative project.

Spurred by such a drive, in the following centuries several European countries moved to establish economies with worldwide reach.6 Appropriately, the Americas as the “new world” became one of the first places “wheresoever” such an exploration of a new territory could take place. America’s Indigenous inhabitants were similarly objectified on account of their differences with explorers’ knowledges on religion, civilization, and governance. Characterized primarily through a political economy of deficits as either primitive or savage peoples (living in a “state of nature,” incapable of civilization, having no government,” and unaware of the “true religion of Christianity”) they were seen as captives to nature, unable to harness nature’s resources, primarily the land, to their advancement.

Thus “naturalized” the Indigenous peoples were discursively divested from their agency in relation to their lands. Worse yet, they were also displaced from their sovereignty over their own lives. The agency and sovereignty shifted to the “civilized discoverers as against the savage barbarians”. In this way, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas emerged as the “whatsoever” pagan people to be captured within Europe’s “civilizational” ambit precisely as they were being externalized to Europe in “political” terms.

Through the sixteen and seventeen centuries, this way of encountering, capturing, and externalizing had already produced at least three rhetorical strategies -- the available repertoire -- for representing the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. These strategies operationalized a limiting economy of representation, portraying Indigenous peoples “either as existing in a state considered to be primitive – that is, enviably innocent of civilization, or... representi[ing them] in a state taken to be inherently savage – that is, one belonging to the implacable enmity, or show[ing them] to be doomed – in which case they represent the products of their own technological
obsolescence in the face of European superiority, whether spiritual or merely material in nature."

As the Renaissance with its emphasis on humanism gave way to the Enlightenment, its legacy in the Americas proved to be contrary to its stated ideals, in effect, enabling the dehumanization of the continent’s Indigenous peoples in profoundly consequential ways. “Stripped of their contextual social and cultural ties,” the Indigenous people were classified simply as Renaissance Europe’s objects of regimentation.

In Greek antiquity, the rule-exception division worked simultaneously as a strategy of community making and a self-conscious positioning (enactment) of the political community within and without. It expressed the dominant modalities of belonging in the community and specified the layers of agency therein. It also articulated differences into a hierarchy of ruling norms and their aberrations, for example, between citizens and slaves or the civilized and the barbarians. Centuries later, when Europe “rediscovered,” through Arab interlocutors, “its” Greco-Roman roots, it harnessed the logic of this binary of hierarchisation by inflecting it with the political and economic imperatives of the given times. From the 14th to the 17th centuries, the Renaissance would give name and form to this inflection, on the hand, inventing and celebrating “rationalism and humanism” for all humanity, and, on the other hand, claiming both exclusively for Europe, as Europe’s inheritance. As a result, Europe alone emerged as the political universe in which these principles presumably held – a presumption that was deployed to position Europe as the “privileged” force having the right to project its rationalism and humanism over those who either by nature or by nurture seemed to lack them.

European explorers introduced this ruling logic into the plane of encounters in the Americas. They encountered and comprehended Indigenous peoples from entirely within the European political, military, cultural, and aesthetic conventions. They reduced the Americas to a discursive product of their imagination by displacing its Indigeneity in relentlessly repressing its Indigenous political and cultural qualifications. In the process, Indigenous conditions were represented as those of ‘bare life’ – lacking any meaningful historical political agency.

“America,” appropriately argued one observer of Europe’s arrival in the new world, “had to be invented because of its explorers’ reluctance to discover it.” “America” was born of Europe’s expansionist imaginary and in turn fueled it. As it propelled Europe’s territorial expansion, it also energized the construction of a certain kind of Europe. It elaborated an hegemonic Europe in relation to the “other worlds” which Europe wanted to control and transform into the “new worlds” for its expansion and habitation. Ultimately, as it was imagined and

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articulated as exception to Europe as the proper trajectory of history, “America” helped to articulate Europe as a rule and made sense of it.

This productive dynamic was crucial in the radical eclipse of Indigenous agency in the relations with Europeans. Through this dynamic Indigenous peoples were subjected to the ontopolitical formulations of Europeans. Despite their resistance and protests, they were forced into relations of ban --- seized, dehumanized, abandoned, and exposed. Their vulnerability was further exacerbated on the thresholds of life where the spaces of inclusion/exclusion regarding Indigenous people shifted into a “zone of indistinction” where Indigenous peoples’ eligibility in the dominant juridical order’s affirmative protection was negated. In Michael Shapiro’s words, they came to inhabit the uncertain terrain “between violence and the law”.¹¹

The shifts in Europe from Renaissance to Enlightenment to Modernity did not initiate foundational changes in the deep logic of the relations of ban. The relations of ban as a repressive mechanism of capture remained central to European encounters with Indigenous peoples. As Stuart Hall contended, the oppositional identities that were supporting the rule/exception divisions continued to create a fertile ground, “a framework of images, in which Enlightenment social philosophy matured [and] Enlightenment social science reproduced within its own conceptual framework many of the preconditions and stereotypes of the earlier discourses of the West and the Rest.”¹²

What enabled this reproductive continuity was not simply the dichotomy of rule/exception as the originary structure of political identities, but its articulation into a discursive field of power and regimentation through relations of ban. Once operational, the field (and the logic that informs its operations) acquired relative stability. The actual operations in the field moved and metamorphosed to accommodate the shifts in historical circumstances, and ultimately, always worked to maintain the field of ban with its dominant modes of agency and sovereignty.

Overall, the paramount task in such a field is the orchestration of subjectivities into a specific ontopolitical “state of being” through the rule/exception division. The idea of exception enables the relations of ban as an expression of a specific form of power -- of a sovereign power -- that acquires its authority in successfully objectifying, externalizing, and finally normalizing the relations it actively constructs and the boundaries it busily establishes. Sovereign power is therefore manifest precisely in the enactment of the rule/exception division into the relations of ban. Sovereignty is not a priori to the rule/exception division, but it is the enactment and continued reproduction of the very division itself into relations of ban.
Given this, beyond its productive dynamics, this form of sovereignty has far-reaching normative consequences no matter the context. Together, the idea of exception and the relations of ban bespeak an imperious sovereign agency. While in reality sovereignty is enacted always historically through a profitable administration of territories and bodies, politically, it is presumed to be extra-political -- transcendental of all politics. It figures as a totalizing form of sovereignty. It recognizes no legitimate alternatives; it is imperial. Disastrously, it is this form of sovereignty that has dominated Indigenous histories in the Americas, determining the historical rules of exchange between Europe’s colonizing powers and America’s Indigenous peoples.

From Earth’s Land to State’s Territory

Cursed be
All your fences
Which encircle you
from within….
Ours is another land….
The human Earth made free,
sisters and brothers.

Pedro Casaldaliga

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant writes about transversality as history’s implosion in all directions, joining places, and throwing people into relations of triumph and trauma, each traceable to one another through submarine roots. Just as the Americas’ traumas were traceable to Europe’s triumphs, Europe’s triumphs, too, were traceable in all directions. In addition to their ontological links to the Americas’ traumas and Africa’s losses, Americas’ traumas were also traceable back to Europe itself, not only in terms of the original inspirations of Europe’s wanderings in the world, but also in terms of the effects of those wanderings on Europe itself in the course of the colonial encounters. So, for Glissant, much like for Said and Mignolo, as Europe regimented and re-cast Indigenous peoples and their civilizations in the Americas and elsewhere, it was also actively shaping and communicating its own “self” in multiple material and symbolic projects and programs unfolding in the transversal space. The transversal space would reach back from the Americas’ devastated ethnoscapes to Europe’s shifting shores and beyond.

Partly consciously, in part by accident, and also by coincidence, European practices of regimentation over the Indigenous peoples, their lands, cultures, languages, and religions folded back on Europe and inspired and sharpened the practices of governmentality over the European peoples and spaces. For
example, the practices of territorial control in the Americas supported territoriality as a politico-cartographic exercise to recast Europe into multiple mutually exclusive places with physical borders, political hierarchies, and cultural limits.

The infamous Papal Bulls (*Inter Caetera divinai*), which, with an eye on the rest of the world, justified the conquest of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas through the rhetoric of serving the Catholic faith, exhibited a cartographic genius that would have a much greater impact on Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous peoples than would the Catholic faith. Not too long after its pronouncement the new cartographic insight contained in the Bulls would be further cultivated in imaginative minds and put to work in the activation of a specific practice of territoriality – territorial control – unfolding increasingly through exclusionary and proprietary modes. It would inspire a world recognized in territorial divisions supporting new political hierarchies and forms of governance. It was Pope Alexander VI who, taking his cue from the Queen and King of Spain, demonstrated his knowledge of the profane when he revealed his solution to the Spanish-Portuguese struggle over the same territories in the Americas.

... by the authority of the Almighty God conferred upon us....do give, grant, assign to you and your heirs and successor kings of Castille and Leon, forever.... all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered, and to be discovered towards the west and south, by drawing and establishing a line from the Arctic pole... to the Antarctic pole... to be distant one hundred leagues towards the west and south from any of the islands commonly known as the Azores and Cape Verde....

The Pope’s genius in the Bulls would invite the rage of the King of France who, partly in astonishment as to the method of allocating control over lands, and partly because of his exclusions from the newly-constructed map of the world protested to no avail: “Where is it written that the world is already divided up.”

But the practice of so dividing the world stuck, acquired further authority, and shaped the ruling minds and cartographic ambitions in Europe and elsewhere. Territorial practices in and with respect to the Americas thus helped clarify the trajectory of the territory-controlling practices in Europe, which in turn influenced the strategies of controlling territory in the Americas and the rest of the world. More significantly, the political economies enacted in the material exploitation of the colonies enabled European powers to consolidate their control within the territories of states, thus slowly crystallizing the idea of territorial inside/outside.
The conquest in the Americas would help to give clarity to the content and contour of the state in Europe. As Torbjørn Knutsen puts it, the moral and legal aspects of the wars against the Indigenous peoples in the Americas sparked a continuing debate in Spain and had the effect of enlarging and clarifying the state’s rights, privileges, and duties in general. Francisco de Vitoria, for example, undertook a study in the 1530s entitled “On the law of the war made by the Spaniards on the barbarians” and ultimately articulated positions on governance and the state that were more instrumental in Spain than in Spain’s colonies. Vitoria attributed to the state a centrality over the territorial political community as the rightful, if desirably lawful, arbiter, and by extension, the author, of the community. His discussions on the doctrine of the rights of discovery were simultaneously about statism and territoriality, for the rights associated with discovery were both geographical and governmental. As Edward Said reminded us, discovery leading to colonialism meant settling and controlling land. Settling and controlling land in turn fueled the desire to enact effective territorial governance and express its boundaries. As Vitoria stated the necessities, competencies and boundaries of the “lawful state” in relation to the Americas, he was certainly, if ahead of his time, broadening and deepening of the reach of the state as an instrument of territorial governance over peoples in general.

In an effort to justify discovery and conquest of the Indigenous peoples and their lands, Vitoria argued that Indigenous peoples were unfit to govern themselves since they “had no proper laws nor magistrates, and are not even capable of governing their family affairs; they are without any literature or arts, not only liberal arts, but the mechanical arts also; they have no careful agriculture and no artisans; and they lack many other conveniences, yea necessaries, of human life.” Fundamentally, Vitoria was recasting the entire scope of the life of people, from laws to arts, to agriculture, as being within the competencies of the colonial state and therefore also as a site of the state’s interventions. Forecasted categorically in Vitoria’s discourse is the notion of the centralizing and territorializing state as an overarching force well before the idea took its organizational form in Europe in the following two centuries. Of course, Vitoria’s intellectual successors, from Hugo Grotius to Emeric Vattel, would sharpen the same logic that creatively related Europe’s overseas engagements to Europe’s engagements with itself, articulating Europe as the state of rule and the rest of the world as Europe’s exception.

In *Nomadic Identities*, May Joseph stresses the co-production of identities and subjectivities in the Caribbean during the colonial era. She argues that early in conquest the Europeans “read cannibalism into the Indigenous sites in order to justify their political, cultural and territorial cannibalism.” Following Joseph’s insight, it is possible to contend that the European cannibalism in sites of conquest enabled its unique territorial and national “cannibalisms” in Europe,
particularly in terms of governmentality – relations, institutions, and subjectivities by which, as Foucault put it, men came to govern other men in regimes of biopolitics. It is important also to remember that the massive momentum the incorporation of the Americas’ gave to European economies strengthened the material capacities for effective biopolitics. Kirkpatrick Sale was not exaggerating in characterizing the significance of this transversal gathering that would paradoxically result in its capture or limiting in territoriality:

...with this act, two vastly different cultures, which had evolved on continents that had been drifting apart steadily for millions of years, were suddenly joined. Everything of importance in the succeeding five hundred years stems from that momentous event: the rise of Europe, the triumph of capitalism, the creation of the nation-state.20

Ironically, Europe’s ascent inspiring and authorizing its interventions within Europe expresses the dynamics of transversality as an implosion of unlikely convergences in multiple directions. In transversality, the Americas’ Indigeneity is related to Europe’s Renaissance, Enlightenment and ultimately its European modernity; it relates to Europe and it “relays” Europe to itself.21 It shows how Europe has discovered (and constructed) itself in part in the Americas’ Indigenous forms. It also shows how in its devastation and dispossession the Indigeneity in the Americas has served as a site of early European modernity where modernity’s emancipatory claims and promises simultaneously revealed their “darker side” in the “contrapuntal” mirror of colonialism.22

Taming Transversality

More than in anything else, in Indigenous lifeworlds, European modernity has been manifest in Europe’s drive to control transversality of space, to arrest it and transform it from an infinite space to a place with exclusionary boundaries and limits. Conceived in the interstices of concurrent struggles over the control of territory both in Europe and the colonies, this drive was ultimately aimed at controlling politics and movement by delimiting politics’ horizons to the emergent territorial state imaginary of the inside/outside divide.23 In the incipient territorial state system, Europe attempted to fix the location of politically qualified life within the territorial orders of states by wedding the state to the nation and declaring that the nation can only “be” within the territorial borders of the state.

As Glissant puts it, in historical terms, this was a drive for a mono-root, singular and unique, where, much like Benedict Anderson demonstrated, none specifically existed in reality.24 What motivated the drive for a mono-root was the productive politics of the “root” anchored in the political economy of colonial conquests. Ultimately, claiming uniqueness (in cultural, religious,
linguistic, and aesthetic senses) authorized European states, from the absolutist to the national ones, to appropriate the material resources of others. In turn, this political economy further facilitated the processes of “root-craft” as statecraft in Europe, thus realizing and affirming claims on unique roots. In short, Europe’s a priori civilizational cultural claims enabled European colonialisms while European colonialisms made possible the subsequent civilizational pursuits that listed Europe as the Center of the World.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that root politics always run the risk of growing repressive. European civilizational pursuits in search of singular roots eventually took on an “intolerant” sense, articulated through “the delineation of borders, the inscription of dangers, and the mobilization of defenses.” Together, they have translated into a repudiation of relationality in favor of hierarchies; they have empowered boundaries instead of cultivating lives in transitions.

It is crucial to note that boundaries were empowered where previously transitions and circular nomadism had characterized life Indigenous communities. This was true especially in North America where cycles and patterns, “ancient, ongoing, and organic,” had guided political and economic activities. The nomadism that accompanied the cycles and patterns was not “free wandering” but an enactment of community in movement. In other words, Indigenous communities established and renewed their roots in constant movements. Accordingly, the cycles and patterns were not “blockages or walls” that incarcerated people but “textures and motions of life that guided” and enabled people in structuring their lives while moving in concert with the shifting textures and rhythms of life. Indigenous peoples, Jennings pointed out, “were not wandering, they were commuting.”

Yet, for Europeans, Indigenous nomadism represented an expression of aimless roaming – a mode of life utterly incapable of cultivating life and civilization. Civilization required staying in place and establishing roots. It required rootedness in a given territory. Indigenous people who were always moving were not considered to be occupying the land usefully and thus were deemed to have developed no property rights. Such was the simple problematization of Indigenous life that enabled the negation of Indigenous use claims over the lands, which were otherwise hosting and supporting their life cycles and patterns. Many “enlightened” scholars and philosophers, from Diderot to Rousseau, from Locke to Mill, and from Vitoria to Vattel, participated in the disarticulation of Indigenous agency. As Edward Said stated, the sort of colonialism Europe introduced into the Americas generated “impressive ideological formations” supporting and “even impelling processes of accumulation and acquisition” through a possessive territorializing imaginary.

This territorial imaginary recast the earth into objectified territory to be possessed, occupied, divided up, and made to serve its cultivators. What Indigenous cycles
and patterns had interconnected into a complex and organic networks of transitions through the transversality of space, European knowledge cut up into a territorial patchwork imposed upon the space of transversality.

Interestingly, although speaking from different temporal and cultural locations, two unlikely figures -- Black Elk and Edward Soja -- point to the same ontopolitical conditions under which the Earth was discursively transformed into a territory. For Black Elk, the shift signified a radical new trajectory, for the life-sustaining “sacred hoop of life” had been broken. Indigenous peoples seemed to have little choice but to accommodate to the new logic, certainly not of their making, nor to their liking. For Soja, the introduction of the logic of new territoriality meant a new form of thinking on locating human life in the world. “Our [European] being in the world,” he wrote, “occurs through a distancing (detachment, objectification) that allows us to assume a point of view on the word.”30 This sort of objectification of the world in ways that representationally detach and spatially distance Indigenous people from the elements of the world could not easily be accommodated, nor accepted, once its implications became clear. The objectification of the Earth displaces it from its inherent agency, which is expressed not simply in “natural elements” but also through Indigenous bodies, which are constitutive of nature as well. Therefore, detachment and distancing of Indigenous being in the world has the effect of disarticulating Indigenous human being, as detachment and distancing empower a different mode of agency and impose unfamiliar, often intolerant, boundaries on Indigenous bodies and their earth.

The historical consequence of this shift to privileging geopolitical territoriality anchoring and bounding nation-roots has since been the substantial eclipse of transversal identity practices, and “fixing and taming such practices within the spatial coordinates of territorial jurisdictions.”31 The geopolitical map of the territorial states and nations has become predominant, in spite of continued resistance, thus still shaping political and ethical problematics the world over.32 In large measure, it continues to be the imposed location of politics, attempting always to confine individual and collective horizons within its limits; but more than its territorial limits, within its ontopolitical limits.

It is in the imposition of Cartesian epistemology that Europe would attempt to transform the landscapes of transversality, so deeply embedded in Indigenous life practices, into a place of its dreams, not in negotiation with Indigenous epistemologies, but in spite of them and for the purpose of subduing or vanquishing them in Europe’s totality. So when Winnebago, a chief of a Mississippi Valley group, retorted that “It would be difficult to divide it [the land] up, for it belongs as much to one as the other,” he was not expressing a simple difficulty. He was performing an alternative epistemology in which the land was conceptualized and practiced primarily as a place of transitions, not of

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exclusionary proprietary territories and borders. Between what was imposed and what was preserved, a heterotopic form, with its inspiration rooted still in patterns and cycles, was enlisting transversality to resist.

Drawing permanent exclusionary borders through the space was strange for North America’s Indigenous peoples from the time of the initial encounters. While the land was intimately known to and used by Indigenous people in what Robert Rundstorm calls “reciprocal collaborations,” it was not generally regimented in ways permanently to deny access to others for use. In fact, it is this non-exclusionary understanding of the use and control of land that characterized the early encounters of settlers with the Indigenous peoples. People’s “mutual exoduses” into and through places determined the modalities of territoriality in Indigenous landscapes into a sort of aterritoriality. In the polyvalent transversal unity that had brought together so many Indigenous groups in North America, peoples’ relations and identities were thus simultaneously rooted and open: rooted in an awareness of the ritualized construction of their identities and relations in collaboration with the land and open in the recognition of the agency of the land. The land possessed agency; it possessed a voice. That which has agency and a voice also has spirit; it can not be divided up, fenced in, or otherwise possessed. One collaborates with it, not conquers it. One moves with it as it unfolds through rivers, mountains, and forests. One is “it” in all the cosmological senses.

Consider the words of the Nez Perce leader Hin-mah-too’yah-kekht, “Thunder Traveling to Loftier Mountain Heights,” which bespeak of the deep epistemological differences that shaped Indigenous conception of territory:

> The Earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same...Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully with respect to my affection for the land.  

At the time of these words, at issue were the claims to the Nez Perce land, right before the Nez Perce war broke in 1877. The United States government was trying to force the Nez Perce away from their ancestral lands into a reservation at Fort Lapwai. For the Nez Perce, the relationship still centers around an effort to communicate across epistemological divides to convince the self-declared “sovereign” -- USA -- of the legitimacy of the Nez Perce epistemology and the modalities of territoriality and transversality that flow from it. Hence the plea against being excommunicated: “Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully with respect to my affection for the land.”
The conception of the land, and thus of territoriality, expressed in Chief Hin-mah-too-yah-kekht’s words point to much more than what the Nez Perce’s antagonists might have characterized as “stone-age” sentimentality and romanticism wrought in “primitive logic.” They reflected a real “contemporaneous” alternative epistemology vis-a-vis the Cartesian vision of the land undergirding Euro-American modernity. The Indigenous claim that the Earth has a mind and its mind expresses itself in the contours and content of the land was strange and inaccessible to US government negotiators. That the earth’s mind could be one with humans’ mind was stranger still, and more importantly, construed as a sign of Indians’ lack of historical agency by the “civilized” standards to speak and be heard and fully understood. (This form of transversality was excommunicated from political consciousness and history. As transversality was excommunicated, so was Indigeneity.)

Interestingly, General Howard, who represented the US government in the “negotiations,” demonstrated this orientation as he referred to the chief spokesperson for the Nez Perce, Toohoolhoolzote, as a nothing more than a “cross-grained growler.” Ironically, Toohoolhoolzote in the Nez Perce native language meant “rhythmic vibrant sound.” Not only did the general not recognize the rhythm in Toohoolhoolzote’s sound as a voice, but also he had him imprisoned for a week during the “negotiations.” Toohoolhoolzote refused to give up the land by “agreement.” (Being communicated into the territorial logic through the agreement meant being excommunicated into the dustbin of history without any claim to historical legitimacy) He refused to participate in the casting of the Nez Perce as “bare life” to be confined to a reservation, saying: “You white people get together, measure the earth, and then divide it…The earth is part of my body, and I never give up the earth.”35 Toohoolhoolzote’s protests were to no avail; the Nez Perce were forcibly removed to the reservation at Fort Walpai -- a paragon of the “relation of ban” in Agambenian sense – a form of modernity that works by banning entire horizons of Indigenous universes.

Reservation Logic, Territoriality, and the Location of Indigenous Peoples

The Nez Perce were neither the first nor the last of Indigenous groups thus ontopolitically incarcerated in what later evolved into the modern United States of America. Reservations as a mode of othering and disappearing the “Indians” became the official policy of the US government in the late 19th century. Nor was the Nez Perce imprisonment unique to the United States. In fact, progressively, as the territorial state system emerged as the prevailing model of governance throughout the world, reservation as a regime of confinement (and as a location of regimentation) has become the mode of problematizing
Indigenous groups, particularly in Latin America, from Columbia and Ecuador to Brazil and Peru. It has become the instrument of “ban” simultaneously excluding Indigenous peoples from the community of “rule” and capturing them within its regime of relationality in both territorial and ontopolitical senses.

Where formal reservations were not established, the logic of reservation has been deployed in practices of governmentality vis a vis Indigenous peoples to deny or truncate Indigenous agency. From Mexico and Guatemala to the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Iran, Algeria, and others, Indigeneity has been problematized through governmentalities that incessantly work to inscribe on Indigenous political, cultural, religious, and aesthetic spaces the relations of reservation as a relation of ban.

Reservation logic as a logic of ban, at the same time that it manifests in both formal and informal governmentalities as bare life, has cultivated and empowered the territorial nation-state as a project of taming and controlling transversality. Where Indigenous contra-modern epistemologies, articulated in transitions, translations, and flows, were disciplined and marginalized into reservations as (primitive) exceptions, territorial nation-states were crafted into reality as the presumed “rule,” the primary territorial locations (containers) of politically qualified lives, proper agencies, audible voices, and modern identities. In territorial statism, territoriality attempted to exceed and even terminate transversality.

Surely, exclusionary boundaries were transposed over the boundlessness of transversality to create spaces of territoriality, anchoring the state system. But transversality, while it has served as the ground of territoriality, has also given rise to “heterotopic-relationality” as a condition and location of resistance to the “reservation” logic of territoriality. In his discussion of heterotopias, Foucault argues that all the predominant spaces produce their counter spaces – heterotopias -- that not only reflect the predominant spatial processes and projects, but also contest and invert them, thus exceeding their control (boundaries). In this paradoxical relationality, heterotopias work to unbind the prevailing boundaries of predominant spaces. Dominant spaces are unbundled within and across movements where the transversal imperative makes possible the heterotopic spaces. And where heterotopic transversality inevitably emerges as both the condition and location of life, what is cast as an exception could still challenge what is declared as the rule. Epistemologies that are marginalized and/or suppressed in planes of domination can still preserve the material and symbolic resources with which contra-sounds and voices that challenge the dominant voices are produced.

As they resonate in this paper, Toohoolhoolzote’s and Hin-mah-too’yah-kekht’s “sounds” and voices, for example, continue to echo the heterotopic
transversality of space in which transitions and translations, not boundaries and confinements, shape spaces into places for living. Their voices continue to point to the possibilities of “difference,” with respect to the locations of life.

Their besieged yet fugitive knowledges show, in the emergent discourses and practices of critical transversal (transnational/transterritorial) environmentalism, migrations, political economy, and democratic governance, how it might be possible to be one with Earth’s mind.

To theorize this tension, one is compelled to dwell on heterotopic-transversality, reflecting the conditions of Indigenous histories in the Americas and beyond in the Columbian era. In heterotopic-transversality, transversality conditions Indigenous histories in spatial terms in the forceful linking of Indigenous horizons with colonial and imperial projects while the heterotopic dynamism born in these linkages transforms Indigenous horizons into resistant productive spaces, or locations, of Indigenous histories. In their practical fusion, transversality and heterotopic dynamics make possible not only the subalterning of Indigenous peoples, namely the relations of ban, but also their resistant capacities.

In his work on "Other Spaces," Foucault maintains that historically space has always taken the form of relations among multiple sites. Any one space in time not only manifests points of linkages and intersections with other spaces, but also contains within itself a plurality of spaces. On the one hand, it hosts practices constitutive of the predominant trajectories of the societies and, on the other, practices contesting and exposing dominant ideologies and their methodologies. For Foucault, the latter, the contestatory practices, are made possible in what he calls “heterotopic spaces,” counter-sites within which the prevailing sites, their relations and subjectivities, are taken hold of and “simultaneously both represented and contested and inverted.”

In relation to heterotopic spaces, transversality represents a certain ontology in spatial practices that exerts itself relentlessly in space. In the Glissantian sense, transversality is a mode of history-as-movement that constantly ushers multiple historical trajectories into each other’s political, economic, and cultural proximities in convergences and dispersals. It creates new networks of identity in unexpected ways. It establishes novel relations across peoples and places in movements and flows, effecting “subterranean” convergence of histories. In the fluid encounters of peoples and places political and cultural consequences ultimately remain unforeseeable in the diffraction of elements. Construed thus, a submarine unity contains too many roots and trajectories to be fully controlled in history.

What Glissant then wants to stress is the relentlessly open, if unpredictable conditions, of transversality that ultimately offers no guarantees for even the
most hegemonic identity practices. In the openness of the transversal space, even the relation of ban is not guaranteed permanent success. Clearly, Glissant echoes de Certeau in the argument that while the predominant relations and trajectories are instantiated in spaces, paradoxically, they also draw attention to the conflictual struggles therein. After all, de Certeau maintains, “spaces occur as the effect[s] produced by the operations that orient [them,] temporalize [them,] and make [them] a function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs.” Thus, spaces as historical political products always remain open to new alignments of relations, identities, and institutions in transversality. The dynamism fueled by the transversal imperatives makes possible, for example, the colonization of continents and their peoples, but also activates and concentrates the resources for resistance and transgression. Geographic expansions, for instance, heighten the value of the land, economic exploitations increase the calls for solidarity, and cultural erasures sharpen the subordinated cultures’ role as a locus of critical enunciations. The relations of ban bear the capacities of insurrection, for the incessant mobility of the elements disallows the stability of relations in the long run.

It is in the productive convergences that heterotopic-transversality reveals the terrestrial and subterranean linkages and intersections conceived, established, and imposed on Indigenous peoples, but also resisted, contested, and even inverted by those peoples. It is the same convergences and dispersals that have fueled Indigenous responses not only to preserve their material and symbolic anchors and grounds in life, but also to assert their Indigenous selves in the relations of control.

Conclusion

They took away everything except the spirit, which they were incapable of seeing.

Julia Esquivel, 1998

In taming transversality, territoriality largely excommunicated Indigenous nations from “sensible” politics, particularly in national and international arenas. It accomplished that by investing sovereignty and authority in anchors distributed territorially across the earth’s surface. Sub-territorial political formations such as Indigenous governments were denied sovereignty, and thus effectively banned from the political realm and flattened into the cultural landscape. Indigenous peoples have struggled to respond to this stranglehold, primarily, to communicate Indigeneity in ways that augment transversality as an alternative planetary compass of governance, a form that does not insubstantialize land as
the soil upon which life takes place, but challenges the territory-articulating modernity as the only measure of the world. As de Certeau said, Indigenous diplomacy is not simply about avoiding being communicated and flattened into the conqueror’s map, but rather marking and re-distributing their traces on to the map differently.

If Foucault, Glissant and de Certeau remind us that Indigeneity remains intact in heterotopic spaces, Armond Mattelart shows how Indigeneity might be communicating itself by using an unusual mode of communication in concert with resurgent transversal effects. This mode of communication works through a “paradigm of the fluid,” as much as by the “paradigm of the mechanic.” In Mattelart’s thinking, the paradigm of the mechanic refers primarily to the dynamics of states and nations while the paradigm of the fluid highlights the rising transnational or transversal interactions and exchanges shaping polities. The paradigm of the fluid characterizes the increasingly post-Cartesian spatio-temporalities around the world’s mainstream. It activates an agentive mode in which the communication is not merely a line in networks of exchanges producing the dominant order. Rather, they are ‘deployed’ as instruments of Indigenous struggles creating networks of what Mattelart calls ‘anti-discipline’ -- the loosely coordinated, counter-hegemonic practices engendering their own spatio-temporal worlds.

Following Mattelart, it is possible to contend that Indigenous peoples struggles are situated in the transition from the ‘paradigm of the mechanic’ (of states, territories, and nations) to the paradigm of the fluid’ (of rising interactive transversality) which characterizes the increasingly post-Cartesian spatio-temporalities.
Indigenous Transversality in Global Politics

Endnotes


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4 Ibid. (p. 4).

5 Ibid. (p. 34).


7 Ibid. (p. 10).

8 Ibid. (p. 110).


12 Hall. Op. Cit. (pp. 219-221).


31 Ibid. (p. 14).


35 Ibid. (p. 44-5).


37 Ibid. (p. 23).

38 A discussion of transversality and relation can be found in two of Glissant’s works. See Note 13 above.
