'Being in Being': Contesting the Ontopolitics of Indigeneity

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the shift towards valorizing indigeneity in western thought and contemporary practice. This shift in approach to indigenous ways of knowing and being, historically derided under conditions of colonialism, is a reflection of the "ontological turn" in anthropology. Rather than seeing indigenous peoples as having an inferior or different understanding of the world to a modernist one, the ontological turn suggests that their importance lies in the fact that they constitute different worlds and "world" in a performatively different way. The radical promise this view holds is that a different world already exists in potentia, the access to which is a question of ontology—of being differently: 'being in being' rather than thinking, acting and world-making as if we were transcendent or "possessive" modern subjects. We argue that the ontopolitical arguments for the superiority of indigenous ways of being should not be seen as radical or emancipatory resistances to modernist or colonial epistemological and ontological legacies but rather as a new form of neoliberal governmentality, cynically manipulating critical, postcolonial and ecological sensibilities for its own ends. Thus, rather than "provincializing" dominant western hegemonic practices, such discourses of indigeneity extend them, instituting new forms of governing through calls for adaptation and resilience.

Introduction

Throughout the history of colonialism, competing representations of the indigenous have been deployed by the colonial powers to their own advantages and ends.[1] Whereas historically the indigenous were represented as belonging to a past temporality in ways that legitimized colonial rule, today their representation as primitive and of the past are less prevalent. Anthropologists are thus more likely today to berate the failure of their discipline to challenge the teleological narratives underpinning the West's historical sense of superiority. The concurrent assumption that indigenous peoples should open themselves to the world is also increasingly challenged by the converse idea that the West has much to learn from them.[2] Accordingly, it is the West that must open itself to the indigenous in ways that not only recognize their rights to life but also recognize the superior value of their ways of life.

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Indeed, not just in anthropology, but in political theory as well, the historical experiences and abiding conditions of indigenous peoples have become pivotal to theorizations of political subjectivity that avow the superiority of indigenous ways of being.[3] Much of this theoretical work is aimed explicitly at "decolonizing statist thinking."[4] This article examines this shift. How is the decolonization of western thought proceeding? What attributes of indigeneity do western theorists most admire? Is this decolonization actually occurring and how is it reflected in the policies of western states, institutions and social practices?

Modernist understandings of the world are in crisis today as reflected by the transformation in western approaches to indigeneity and in particular to "indigenous knowledge." This crisis is being played out in the domain of ontopolitics—the debate over the politics of being. We claim that the current governing practices seek to celebrate indigenous ways of being not simply to promote the rights and well-being of indigenous peoples but to find new ways of governing the populations of the western world broadly conceived. We hold that the challenge of ontopolitical arguments for the superiority of indigenous ways of being should not be seen as radical or emancipatory resistances to modernist or colonial epistemological and ontological legacies but rather as a new form of neoliberal governmentality, cynically manipulating critical, postcolonial and ecological sensibilities for its own ends. Rather than "provincializing" dominant western hegemonic practices, discourses of indigeneity are functioning to extend them, instituting new forms of governing through calls for adaptation and resilience. The basic issue, we argue, is not that of resisting western or modernist attempts to colonize or assimilate communities seen negatively as indigenous or nonmodern, but the opposite: that of preventing the indigenization of contemporary neoliberal governmentalities.

Ontopolitics of Indigeneity

We are not alone in seeing the transformation of approaches to indigeneity as a symptom of the crisis of the modernist episteme. We are happy to think with and through the work of Mario Blaser, among others, who has highlighted the connections between the ontopolitics of indigeneity and the reworking of discourses of western hegemony. Blaser argues that the modernist framing of knowledge hinged upon the interrelated and co-constitutive framing of three core elements.[5] Firstly, the strict divide between nature and culture: the modern idea that there is only one universal reality, accessible through science, whereas diverse perspectives and views of this reality were articulated through studies of culture. Secondly, the understanding of cultural difference in hierarchical and temporal terms, whereby modern culture (based on the nature/culture divide) is understood to have developed from the western Enlightenment and to have spread through colonial and imperial expansion to the rest of the globe. And thirdly, the linear conception of time according to which the development and territorial expansion of modernity is seen as part of the process of historical progress, leaving "nonmodern" cultures as peoples without histories or historical subjectivity.

As Blaser notes, the coherence and hegemonic acceptance of these three elements has now started to unravel. This unraveling is expressed across the social sciences and humanities as the "ontological turn," which challenges the foundational and universal claims of the nature/culture divide.[6] He points out that work in Science and Technology Studies (STS) has been key to problematizing the claims of the separation between nature and culture, which reflects the broader loss of faith in the powers of science and technology to sustain

modernist notions of progress. Blaser also notes the contribution of indigenous political movements in Latin America, especially in Bolivia and Ecuador, which have contested the liberal politics of multiculturalism and raised previously excluded questions about the nature and spaces of politics, challenging the modernist ontology that restricts rights and protections only to human subjects. This disruption of the division of authority between science and politics draws on Bruno Latour's view of the gradual collapse of the Modern Constitution in matters of ecological, scientific, moral and environmental concerns and which is clearly not merely a product of the "Indigenous struggle" itself.[7]

It is necessary to clarify from the outset that, although it is possible to relate the political challenge of indigeneity to indigenous political movements, this challenge is far broader in content and stakes. As Blaser argues, the field of ontological politics is one fought out over "practices, performances and enactments and not with specific groups." For our purposes we conceive indigeneity as a surface on which ontopolitics appears rather than as the driver or dynamic behind this critical challenge. The ontopolitical clash between a modernist ontology and alternative ways of "worlding" is not literally a clash between different groups or collectivities, as Blaser clarifies:

> In short, the attribution of modernness would go hand in hand with specific practices and not with a specific group. For instance, I would feel unwarranted to call modern the practices of middle-class white women involved in Wicca. Likewise, neither indigenous identity automatically translates into an other-than-modern ontology, nor does indigenous involvement make a conflict an ontological one.[8]

Indigenous approaches and indigenous "knowledge" should not be seen as representative of a political, social or cultural group but rather as an alternative to modernist ways of being, knowing and governing. The rise of indigeneity and the transformation in approaches to indigeneity therefore says more about the crisis of modernist ways of being in the world than about the struggles and demands of indigenous groups *per se* and is often in direct conflict with them.[9]

What is important is that the ontological turn in the social sciences—a metonym for the end of the culture/nature divide—has gained new traction for celebrations of indigenous forms of knowledge, ways of being and world-views that provide support for alternative practices and ways of acting in the world. These alternative approaches have been eagerly taken up by governing institutions seeking new ways of reviving and maintaining neoliberal frameworks of rule, from the international level through state bodies to local authorities. The convergence of critical approaches in STS, postcolonial theory, queer theory and post-structuralist feminism with new and emerging governing agendas has given indigeneity a political purchase that would otherwise seem entirely unrelated to historical or contemporary political trends. In the rest of this essay we develop a careful analysis of how indigeneity functions discursively, both in political theory and policy, to produce new forms of thinking concerning subjectivity. These new forms of subjectivity, we argue, contrary to the claims of their manufacturers, are disabling of people's capacities for political action.

In the following section we trace the rise of the notion of dispossession as a mode of being in the world that, while supposedly definitive of indigenous subjectivity, can and ought to be universalized as a "property" of subjects of the wider western world and beyond. Further sections relate the focus upon indigeneity to the ontological turn and the crisis of modernist approaches in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in anthropology and geography. We highlight how these forms of indigenous subjectification operate in

relation to the capacities and performativities of resilience, the aim of which is to help western societies cope with the environmental crises of the Anthropocene. While the modern subject is encouraged to "become indigenous," the attention to indigeneity, we argue, does not extend to the suffering and struggles of indigenous peoples who are held to have failed to become more-than-human exemplars of resilience.

Dispossession and Indigenous Agency

The appropriation and occupation of indigenous lands, the dispossession of indigenous peoples, including notably, but not exclusively, the Palestinians, has led not simply to arguments for the return of those lands to their original owners but also to the articulation of the experience and condition of dispossession itself as a basis on which to theorize political subjectivity. In terms of the will to combat liberalism and liberal theories and practices of subjectivity this focus on the problem of dispossession is understandable. As is well documented, liberal arguments dating back to the seventeenth century concerning the nature and right to property, especially the conditions for the exercise of the right to claim ownership of land, were fundamental to the colonial project and "gigantic process of expropriation" to which indigenous peoples were subjected.[10] Colonizers, in other words, would not have been able to justify their projects without the underlying theories of property that served to legitimate the acts of dispossession of indigenous peoples.

Of all the theories of property it was John Locke's theory that has proved the most influential in legitimating the colonial dispossession of indigenous peoples. Locke's central claim was that only those who till the soil of the land on which they live, and improve, cultivate and develop it, can claim the right to own it. The distinction between those who cultivate the land and those who merely live off it thus provided the rationale for dispossessing indigenous peoples of the right to their land.[11] This distinction concerns not simply the relationship of a people to a particular land but its relationship to nature as such. Is the people in question one that has transcended nature and through its development of the soil become its master? Or is it a people that lives simply in subordination to nature, as other animals do, living off the land without improving it? These are the questions that underlie the Lockean theory of property that provided the basis not just for the dispossession of indigenous peoples of the lands on which they lived, thus denying their right to those lands, but also the racist reasoning that in turn legitimated the long history of violence against them. No wonder then that the supposedly postliberal theories of political subjectivity today involve serious reflection on the nature of dispossession itself.

This postliberal approach is explicitly and forcefully critiqued in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's 2013 *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. They conceive dispossession both as an act, "as one way that subjects are radically de-instituted," and as an attribute of the subject that offers a counter-movement to the forces of dispossession. Butler and Athanasiou contest the histories and continuing realities of dispossession by addressing the deeper terrains of its subject-formations. The problem they identify lies both in the right to dispossess and in its assumption at the heart of the liberal subject. This assumption, which is crucial to the distinction between colonizing and colonized subjects, was the notion that the colonizers had transcended nature. Butler and Athanasiou seek to avoid any avowal of a subject that "possesses itself and its object world, and whose relations with others are defined by possession and its instrumentalities" in the struggle against regimes that dispossess

indigenous peoples. "Prizing the forms of responsibility and resistance that emerge from a 'dispossessed' subject," they underline their awareness that "dispossession constitutes a form of suffering for those displaced and colonized." Their gesture of solidarity with the peoples who have been historically dispossessed is accompanied by a normative gesture that signals the need for constraint on the part of the indigenous lest they seek recourse to the forms of possessive individualism that the authors otherwise identify with colonizers: "How to become dispossessed of the sovereign self and enter into forms of collectivity that oppose forms of dispossession that systematically jettison populations from modes of collective belonging and justice" is thus the question they raise.[12]

Likewise, it is the question of how to oppose forms of dispossession in ways that function doubly to produce dispossessed forms of subjectivity.[13] Too many social and political struggles against dispossession are thought to recuperate the same logic of possession that accounted for the original dispossession from which the struggles in question emerged. As Libby Porter argues, "the social field of rights-based struggle becomes stuck in a mode that seeks parity only within the frame of liberal 'possessive individualism'. Rights under this conception are a bundle of things that can be possessed, held, alienated and exchanged, and express the positionality of a possessing unitary subject."[14] The project of liberalism—not just dispossessing peoples of their lands for liberal development, but reconstituting those peoples as liberal—requires that they too partake in the logic of possession, becoming themselves possessive subjects, claiming rights to property and procedures consistent with their liberalization. This invitation, to become possessive, to partake in the logic of possession, and to emerge as fully-fledged liberal subjects, is one that has to be refused.

This invitation, however, as we have known at least since Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), is not what it seems to be. One cannot transition from colonized subject to liberal subject without conceding to one's subjugation to the colonial schema itself. The sustainability of colonial power depends on the capacity to transform the colonized population into subjects of imperial rule.[15] Thus the liberation from colonial subjugation requires the colonial subject to wage war on that schema itself.[16] Embracing the logic of possession cannot work, therefore, as a mode of resistance to liberal colonialism. It does not work to produce justice even in the most naive sense. In situations where people have been dispossessed of the lands on which they lived, or as is often the case nowadays, have been displaced from one place to another, the ability to come into possession of another plot of land or place simply cannot compensate for their loss: "There is no genuine space in compensation payment calculus to attend to the loss and grief of a neighbourhood abandoned, the bulldozing of a home, the erasing of memories or the shattering of lives," as Porter argues.[17]

Of course, as Porter admits, this critique does not quite apply in the context of indigenous claims. It is, as she argues, "a different manifestation of a possessory calculus at work in the recognition politics around indigenous land rights, for clearly indigenous claims are intrinsically linked to particular spaces. The whole notion of indigenous property is that it is inalienable, and cannot be traded for another locale on the planet."[18] The struggles of indigenous peoples, in Australia for example, to re-possess their lands, by claiming indigenous title rights, is real and ongoing, and meeting with some success. The royalties paid to title-owning indigenous people by mining companies has led to a growing Aboriginal middle-class. It is true that success here is measured merely in terms of the socioeconomic betterment of Aboriginals under market conditions, by their ability, in other words, to exploit

their possessions through trade with other market actors, particularly resource-seeking extractive industries. This poses a serious problem for anyone concerned with the deeper political problem of the entrenchment of liberalism and the underlying colonization of the indigenous implied by such socioeconomic success. It is for this very reason that opposition to dispossession requires a wholly different mode of engagement, something other than a mere assertion of the struggle for possession.

Butler and Athanasiou define this alternative form of politics as "performative." Performativity describes the ways by which dispossessed subjects produce themselves as political subjects under the conditions of their dispossession without asserting themselves as self-possessed and possessive subjects. It is a politics that applies and can be found, they argue, among a remarkably wide variety of subject positions: indigenous peoples dispossessed of their land, refugees and the stateless, the *sans papiers*, migrant labourers, as well as sexual minorities that are "dispossessed by regimes of gender and sexual normativity." Regardless of the normative constraint against becoming possessive, these are groups the precarious conditions of which actually preclude the assertion of "the logic of possession." The performative emerges, they argue, "precisely as the specific power of the precarious—unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself—to demand the end to their precarity."[19]

Butler and Athanasiou discuss concrete instances of performativity—the singing of the national anthem of the United States in Spanish by illegal immigrants in the streets of Los Angeles in 2006; the street demonstrations and self-immolations in Morocco and Tunisia in 2010 and 2011 respectively, which contributed to the Arab Spring; hunger strikes; the marches of women across the deserts of Northern Mexico in protest of the rapes occurring there; the performance art of Regina Jose Galindo. All of these are instances of peoples dispossessing themselves in order to dispossess coercive powers.[20] Other instances discussed by scholars of performativity include naked blogging, such as the naked pictures posted by the Egyptian Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, which are said to have contributed not just to the Egyptian revolution of 2011, but to a reconfiguration of the body politic and a re-imagining of the theater of the political.[21] The use of public nudity by the Femen movement and its mobilization against Islamic oppression, including the "international topless jihad day," is also discussed in this framework.[22] We may also refer to the poignant acts of self-dispossession on the Mediterranean shores, of people giving their homes to refugees who have been dispossessed of their own homes by ongoing wars whether in Syria, Africa or elsewhere.

What all such instances have in common, Butler and Athanasiou argue, is that "rather than implying a transcendent euphoria of effective will or redemption," their performance "pertains to the ordinary and extraordinary forces of endurance and survival." It is not a politics aimed at constituting a subject that is possessive but one that (re-)produces the subject's dispossession while seeking to displace the regimes of dispossession through "a labor of sensing, imagining, envisaging, and forging an alternative to the present."[23] It is an alternative grounded, avowedly, in the condition and subject of dispossession. Yet how, indeed, to dispossess the dispossessed of any desire to become the possessors is the deeply paradoxical task Butler and Athanasiou set themselves. In this sense, whatever the authors might discursively claim, their work is also an argument for dispossession in the negative sense they claim to oppose. It presupposes a politics that can only function through modes of dispossession performed upon people and not simply in opposition to it. It is a politics that constructs a particular kind of body—obdurate, persistent, insistent on its continuous and collective thereness, organized without hierarchy, enacting its message performatively

through the occupation of a public space and its self-display, individually as well as collectively. It is not a body that can ever or will ever master the space it occupies.

The argument, of course, is that this way of performing political subjectivity is necessary as a turn away from and against the liberal tradition of thinking and practicing political subjectivity, based as it supposedly has been on the assumption of a body that masters, possesses, and improves the spaces it occupies. Instead we have to grasp the body as a thing that performs a poiesis in space, that is, a double movement involving both desubjugation and self-making. This understanding of the body, of "the subject" as such, derives from Butler's interpretation of Michel Foucault's theory of the subject formation. Poiesis, she argues, is central to the mode of existence of the subject, which must risk itself in making itself in order to desubjugate itself from particular regimes of truth. This is not a theory of the subject as transcendent or masterful or in possession of itself or others, but rather of a self or subject outside of subjugating modes of subjectivation. The subject is always, regardless of its capacities to make itself, orchestrated by power.[24]

In the work of Butler and of others we can see that the indigenous subject is undergoing a transformation. No longer seen as a subject that calls for political solidarity in a struggle against colonial or neoliberal domination in order to repossess the lands of which it has been robbed, the transformed indigenous subject performs a new understanding of politics and ontology: by being dispossessed this subject challenges hegemonic ways of asserting possession. Here, it is not resistance but defeat itself that is celebrated.[25] Thus the indigenous subject is no longer conceptualized in terms of what it might become but in terms of what it has been turned into by the very regimes that have exploited it.

Being in Being

This shift in approach to indigenous forms of knowing and being reflects the ontological turn in anthropology. Rather than seeing indigenous ways of understanding the world as inferior or different from our modern understandings, this turn suggests their importance as constituting different worlds and performatively "worlding" the world in a different way. The radical promise is that a different world already exists in potentia and that moderns can choose to make it by learning to world in the ways indigenous peoples already do. In place of the politics of critique we have an ontopolitics of alternative ways of being in the world. Access to this alternative world is a question of ontology—of being differently— being in being rather than thinking, acting and world-making as if we were transcendent or possessive subjects.

It is the ontopolitics of being that makes the difference here. This is where the ontological turn in anthropology plays a crucial role, one which is closely aligned to that of STS, or to actor-network theory approaches, which similarly seek to undermine the modernist episteme founded upon the culture/nature divide.[26] The much-cited debate in the 2010 issue of *Critique of Anthropology* on whether "Ontology is Just Another Word for Culture" highlights what is at stake.[27] The point of contestation for the anthropologists who argue that the ontological turn is distinct from the study of culture is their concern that focusing on cultural understanding never took alterity seriously enough. In other words, the study of different cultures affirmed the modernist world-view rather than challenging it; its basic assumption was that western knowledge needed to expand to understand why other cultures thought in the way they did rather than questioning its hegemonic concept of the universal nature of knowledge.[28]

This assumption was based on the view that the world was single and uniform and that culture depended on the plural ways of representing the world.[29] The nature/culture divide was thus affirmed rather than challenged through the study of culture or the focus on epistemological differences. Blaser argues that the side-effect of the culturalist approach was that by minimizing differences the modern ontology was naturalized in the process of 'Sameing' rather than Othering, which is why the turn to ontology "radicalizes" postcolonial theory by taking difference more seriously.[30]

Martin Holbraad, in turn, argues that the ontological approach does not start from the question of why others "get stuff wrong" but rather challenges the analytical concepts anthropologists actually use.[31] Thus the ontological turn is an ethical challenge to take alterity seriously by taking what interlocutors say literally rather than metaphorically. However, for Blaser (drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, John Law, Donna Haraway, Annemarie Mol and others) this is where the ontological turn reaches its limit: it assumes that realities are "out there" rather than being continually and multiply enacted or performed.[32] On this point Mol's work is particularly useful: "understanding ontology as performance or enactment brings to the fore the notion of ontological multiplicity," where different stories and practices are neither describing something existing ultimately 'out there' nor are they mistaken or metaphorical, but actually enact or 'world'.[33] This defines ontological work that tends to see multiple ontologies as a literal metaontology (such as Philippe Descola's project of mapping ontologies, or Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*).[34]

The focus on enactment, performance and practice is crucial to understanding the centrality of indigeneity and indigenous knowledge in the contemporary critical and policy discourse. Rather than taking as given the multiple ontologies of anthropology and thus reducing ontology to culture, ontologies should be practiced or enacted rather than merely mapped, studied or collected.[35] It is these enactments that bring new worlds into being. But the question is what worlds should and should not be brought into being. All these worlds potentially exist equally at the ontological level: the distinction is an ethico-political one. Whereas postcolonial and decolonial thought seeks to bring other human, nonmodern worlds, into a relationship of equality and mutual respect, the debate around indigeneity and indigenous knowledge cannot be fully grasped in these traditional political terms. The political ethics of the ontological turn goes beyond the anthropocentric contestations of the last century by emphasizing the urgency of listening to *nonhuman* actors and agents. It is thus in the new context of global warming, extreme weather events, environmental disasters and the Anthropocene that indigeneity and alternative ways of being are integrated into governance.

The point we wish to emphasize is that in extending its scope to include the nonhuman, the focus on indigeneity is not merely a reflection of the crisis of modern ontology but is a necessary result the particular form of that crisis today. In making this claim we do not mean that indigenous peoples are seen or treated as if they were nonhuman or not fully human, but quite the opposite: we seek to promote and extend indigenous ways of being. However, the reason why indigenous ways of being are feted is for the specific attributes of coping with natural or environmental problems, which are seen to evade the grasp of modern science and technology. When nature was seen as a passive object open to modernist understanding and appropriation, indigenous ways of being were said to lack history and agency. Today, the tables have turned. As Latour notes, it seems that nature has more power and agency than humans and better ways of knowing and calculating.[36] The collapse of the

nature/culture divide and the focus on the interactive and contingent power and agency of natural forces, previously ignored and thought to be passive, innate and lacking in agency, has transformed the understanding of indigeneity. The indigenous are the anthropocene-alogists of nonmodern ontology: they can teach us how to see the nonhuman differently.

Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous ways of being and knowing are not re-evaluated today because of a newfound concern with indigenous peoples or out of solidarity with their struggles. Indigenous knowledge is not valued or constructed for its own sake; the point is to preserve this knowledge as a different ontology in a world of multiple ontologies. It is used metonymically for ways of developing new empirical and pragmatic approaches for dealing with environmental crises under the constraints of neoliberal ideology. The byword for the interest in indigeneity and indigenous knowledge is *resilience*: the need to accept and cope with environmental disasters and the consequences of global warming.[37] In the face of recurring economic recessions and lack of mobilizing political ideologies, governing elites seek to draw on critical and postcolonial thought to sell the end of the liberal imaginaries of progress and development as an emancipatory vision of learning to adapt to natural contingencies.

Indigenous knowledge is a practical, performative, nonmodern ontology. What is at stake is the capacity of indigenous ways of knowing to take alterity—the nonhuman—seriously rather than the anthropologists' capacity to take indigeneity seriously. If the latter were the case, the focus would not be on the problems of the modern episteme but on the problems facing real indigenous groups in their struggles over rights, representation and resources.[38]

There are two key aspects in promoting indigenous knowledge. Firstly, the pragmatic ways of coping with ongoing crises, that is, discovering coping strategies and learning to live in permanent crises. Laura Rival, for example, has studied how the manioc cultivators of Guyana "have learnt to live with" severe drought and flooding as normal conditions of life.[39] It is these kind of coping strategies that have brought indigenous knowledge to the forefront of international policy gatherings, as exemplified in the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Indigenous knowledge was acknowledged in the Fourth Assessment Report as "an invaluable basis for developing adaptation and natural resource management strategies in response to environmental and other forms of change."[40] This recognition was reaffirmed at IPCC's 32d Session,[41] and traditional knowledge was included as a guiding principle for the Cancun Adaptation Framework adopted at the 2010 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference in Cancun (UNFCCC).[42] The outline of the IPCC's Working Group II contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report included local and traditional knowledge as a distinct topic within Chapter 12 on human security.[43] As a joint UNESCO and UN report states:

> Indigenous [peoples] are not only potential victims of global climate change. Attentiveness to environmental variability, shifts and trends is an integral part of their ways of life. Community-based and local knowledge may offer valuable insights into environmental change due to climate change, and complement broader-scale scientific research with local precision and nuance. Indigenous societies have elaborated coping strategies to deal with unstable environments, and in some cases, are already actively adapting to early climate change impacts. While the transformations due to climate change are expected to be unprecedented, indigenous knowledge and coping strategies provide a crucial foundation for community-based adaptation measures.[44]

Secondly, the actual ways of knowing—the preventive or anticipatory knowledge of nonhuman forces, which is occluded by modernist ontology. In the Anthropocene, the main concern is not to bring in excluded human voices and political alternatives but rather to quell political debate and human demands by listening to the alleged needs of "nature" and the "environment." The entry of "things" or the "nonhuman" into political discourse cannot come about without the claims to knowledge of their interlocutors. While things cannot speak for themselves, indigenous forms of performativity enable hearing their voices, and act as intermediaries. Thus indigenous ways of being can extend the ontopolitical ethics to include the realm of the more-than-human. Whereas anthropology, even after the ontological turn, can only focus on human understandings and make things speak through humans,[45] indigenous knowledge, so it is claimed, provides the one route through the subject/object quagmire.

Laura Rival provides two examples of how indigenous ways of knowing enact a nonmodern epistemology and ontology through taking alterity seriously. On the epistemological level, rather than focusing on representational knowledge, indigenous knowledge works relationally: it sees things in relation to each other rather than focusing on causal chains. It can thus build on the knowledge of nonhuman actants in the environment such as plants and animals:

> to anticipate subtle changes in the weather by observing the flowering and fruiting of certain plant species, the feeding and nesting behavior of certain bird species, or changes in the behavior of amphibious animals—in particular alligators. … There is little doubt that the Makushi use a complex system of ecological indicators to predict changes in weather patterns.[46]

On the ontological level, Rival draws attention to alterity, which appears to lie beyond the reach of radical anthropologists who cannot abandon their modernist assumptions. The concern with seeing from the point of view of nonhuman actants and agents presupposes a close communal relationship with the more-than-human being. As an example, Rival describes a project to reintroduce Coho salmon to a polluted watershed on the Amazon, which failed when undertaken by Western experts with modern science and technology but was a success when guided by indigenous knowledge: "This was accomplished through observing the river, to know it and experience it as a salmon would," by not seeing the river as a straight line but as a series of vortexes and branching fractals.[47]

This attention to alterity stands in direct opposition to theories of subjectification as an autonomous actor or subject of rights; here there is the imaginary of acting in the world without modernist culture/nature or subject/object divides. As the Aboriginal activist Mary Graham writes: "Western logic rests on the division between the self and the not-self, the external and the internal… [whereas] Aboriginal logic maintains that there is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no 'external world' to inhabit."[48] Julie K. Gibson Graham and Gerda Roelvink invoke the ontopolitical ethics of indigeneity as an example of embodied nonmodern knowledge and the construction of more-than-human communities. In their 2010 article in the radical journal *Antipode*, they cite the Aboriginal anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose:

> Rather than humans deciding autonomously to act in the world, humans are called into action by the world. The result is that country, or nature, far from being an object to be acted upon, is a self-organising system that brings people and other living things into being, into action, into sentience itself.[49]

Drawing upon indigenous, feminist and STS approaches, they argue that rather than the modernist perception of human subjects acting upon the world, we need to let the world affect us by developing the indigenous capacities of "learning to be affected." Allowing the land to speak to us would enable the development of more-than-human communities that are necessary for life in the Anthropocene.[50]

Becoming Indigenous

The dominant current discourse of neoliberal governance centers on resilience, of "learning how to learn in living environments." As Rival argues, this is a demand to "become indigenous." She coins the term "indigenous intelligence" to denote the capacity to learn how to dwell in the world in such a way that one is intertwined and concerned with its care, such that one's very care for the world functions as self-care. It is a form of intelligence that she documents not only in indigenous peoples, such as the Makushi in the borderlands of northern Brazil and southern Guyana, but also among the young environmental activists she met in Brazil who are learning how to dwell, to be in being, and are thus "becoming indigenous." "Living well" for these activists "means thinking and acting in a world where built environments are not severed from wilderness, as all spaces need to be meshed within a web of relationships that unfolds into seamless socio-ecological spaces of dwelling." For them "there is absolutely no difference between 'caring for the earth,' 'caring for people,' and 'caring for the self.' It's all part of the same ethics, all part of the same challenge." Indigenous intelligence, the attribute that underwrites indigenous subjectivity, thus exists from the savannahs of the Guiana shield to the coasts of California.

Resilience, according to Rival, results from the capacity, the indigenous intelligence, of dwelling in the world:

> [It] comes from understanding human physical presence on earth in terms of relative intensity. At one end of the continuum, we find the houses and buildings where people live, work, and make intensive use of resources; at the other, the spaces where people refrain from going or intervening, and where nature is left alone to organize things. All aspects of human life are linked. First, food, water, and shelter, including the flows of energy and waste that make a home a home; then, transport, education, and models of decision making, or the web of relations that link homes together over time and space; finally, spirit or soul, or what links home dwellers to other sentient beings. This is how people and nature are linked up, in a total socio-ecological fact.[51]

The ascription of resilience to indigenous peoples has often been emphasized in recent years. The indigenous are seen and celebrated as paragons of a way of living in relation with nature—and as a model to peoples worldwide. Thus, according to Marjo Lindroth and Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen, "The victims of the colonial past" are now perceived as "the agents of today's world."[52] Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen offer a rare critique of this representation as a manifestation of how biopower *preserves* colonial power rather than "decolonize[ing] statist thought"—which anthropologists, such as Rival, claim should have happened. Yet the ascription of resilience to the indigenous is not argued only by radical anthropologists: it is a mantra so often repeated by states and other powerful actors worldwide that it has become a governing cliché.

It is, however, a powerful and dangerous cliché, for it presents the indigenous as an exemplary *neoliberal subject* who is defined, as we have argued elsewhere, by the capacity to

adapt to the dangers of the world in living a life reduced to the celebration of mere survival.[53] This cliché is powerful and dangerous insofar as it functions to discipline the indigenous themselves into performing their own resilience. But what happens to indigenous peoples, individually and collectively, when for whatever reason, they don't show resilience? Are they somehow to be deemed less indigenous? Or are they examples of failed indigeneity? Are they less intelligent than other indigenous peoples?

In April 2016, while writing this article, the *Guardian* reported that the Attawapiskat people, an indigenous community numbering around 2,000 members, living in the Canadian province of Ontario, had declared a state of emergency after 11 of its members attempted suicide. Reports indicated that 28 people had attempted suicide during the previous month, and that more than 100 had done so since the previous September ("State of Emergency Declared over Suicide Epidemic in Canadian First Nation Community," *Guardian*, April 10, 2016). The regional First Nations government responded by sending a crisis response unit including mental health nurses and social workers. On April 12, the Canadian parliament held an emergency debate on the crisis. Charlie Angus, the MP responsible for representing the Attawapiskat, was reported to have compared the crisis to that sparked by the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee, whose corpse was washed ashore on his way to Europe (Jorge Barrera, "During Suicide Debate Justice Minister Says It's Time for First Nations to Shed Indian Act 'Shackles,'" *APTN National News*, April 13, 2016). Angus described how the spate of suicides of the Attawapiskat had similarly "shocked the world" causing people worldwide to question how Canada could have neglected so many of its own population ("Canadian Parliament to Hold Emergency Debate on First Nation Suicide Crisis," *Guardian*, April 12, 2016.) Jody Wilson-Raybould, the Justice Minister in Justin Trudeau's government, and herself of indigenous origin, as reported by Barrera, declared that Canada's indigenous peoples were now at a crucial juncture, "as they seek to deconstruct their colonial legacy and rebuild their communities," arguing that "only the colonized can decolonize themselves and change is not easy."

In March the larger Pimicikamak community of Manitoba, of around 6,000 members, was also declared to be in a state of emergency following a series of 6 suicides over three months, and 140 attempts in two weeks: "It's sad that we had to do that," said the chief of the Pimicikamak, but "we needed to tell the world that as Aboriginal people we don't have a lot of those things that are available to others." (Ashifa Kassam, "First Nations Suicide Emergency: A Symptom of Canada's Systemic Neglect," *Guardian*, April 13, 2016). That cry for help had not been met with the same response. There was no global news reportage of the declaration, no articles in the *Guardian*, and no world news television reports. The Canadian parliament held no emergency debate on Pimicikamak. The reasons for this disparity in response are as always impossible to be sure about. On the face of things it would seem an odd disparity. Six members of Pimicikamak had died as the result of their suicide attempts, while only one member of Attawapiskat had died. Why, then, did the Attawapiskat crisis draw such attention while that in Pimicikamak was ignored? Perhaps it was the density of attempts at suicide in Attawapiskat: 99 of those 100 enumerated attempts at suicide did not "succeed." And yet those "failures" achieved a performative value that succeeded in eliciting a significant response from the world media, as well as from the Canadian government. In other words, we need to recognize suicide as another example of what Butler and Athanasiou describe as performative power: the possession of the dispossessed, that power that belongs to the precarious—unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself—to

demand the end to their precarity.[54] "I will never apologise for declaring a state of emergency for our people," said the chief of the Pimicikamak; "We want the mental health services, the therapists, the child psychologists, the psychiatrists, we don't have these in the community" (Kassam, "First Nations Suicide Emergency").

There is a certain irony in indigenous peoples' demanding an end to their colonization by the state and at the same time demanding mental health services, therapists, child psychologists, and psychiatrists. Desirous of independence and freedom from the state, they continue to express their dependence on the very same institutions that account for the conditions of their servitude. The dependence is real; it is not a fiction or simply a discourse. Indigenous men in Canada are far more likely to die by suicide than non-indigenous men; and indigenous women even far more likely than non-indigenous women. Young indigenous people, in particular, die by suicide five to six times more often than non-indigenous youth. And there is the widespread social suicide caused by diabetes, smoking, drinking, and obesity—problems the inability to solve of which the indigenous themselves deplore. This is a people that is the polar opposite of the image of the resilient subject with which neoliberal regimes like to portray indigenous peoples: dependent, incapable of surviving without state intervention, and lost in the contradictions of its own discourses of self.

In her 2014 article, "In Attawapiskat," published in the *Walrus* (October 15, 2014), Louise Bernice Halfe, the celebrated indigenous poet, described life in the very place where the suicide crisis is unfolding today. She describes the poverty and the desperation of the place and its people. She describes the ways in which the Canadian government, in alliance with the extractive industries, and the churches, "terrorized the people into submission, into accepting poverty." How they "robbed a people, by diminishing the lives that had previously sustained them" and how that people now "sit precariously, alternating between self-preservation and self-destruction, clinging to what can still be lost—still be taken"; these people "don't complain loudly" but "live in the country of the heart," the heart being "the only place to which they can escape." On Attawapiskat "we struggle, but we manage, and even maintain a culture of ceremony and celebration. Life goes on. Black humour prevails as we poke fun at ourselves, and at the powers that be. Still… *the spark of resilience endures and our people survive*."

Conclusion

We have argued that the figure of the indigenous, far from producing a decolonization of state thinking, is being deployed to valorize disempowering conceptions of subjectivity. Dispossessed, and disallowed the possibility to assert its counter-power to repossess, discourses on indigeneity produce the image of a subject that perseveres through adapting itself to the natural exigencies of its existence. This is a subject whose life lacks the force "to act in the sense of making anything like a definitive event occur in the world,"[55] but that nevertheless persists through its embodied and performative capacities for resilience: enduring and coping under extreme duress. Under traditional colonial and modernist discourses, this view of indigenous peoples as resilient, this timeless or circular situation of stasis, would have been starkly counterposed to western or Eurocentric notions of progress or development.[56] As such, it would have been an invitation to intervene, to colonize, develop or civilize. Today, in contrast, the ability to merely survive is seen as a lesson in resilience

and ecological sustainability that western subjects need to take on board in their attempts to survive in the new conditions of the Anthropocene.

Our aim in writing this article was to explore what it would mean to resist the call to "become indigenous" and suborn ourselves to the "more-than-human" communities espoused by radical academics and activists, drawing on feminist, poststructuralist and STS approaches, and promoted by leading international institutions that appear to want us to resign to a world of perpetual crisis. The proponents of the ontopolitics of "being in being" reify the contingent crises of neoliberalism as natural or inevitable. Thus the ontopolitical ethics of the Anthropocene parasitically feed off the crisis of the human and social sciences, built on the fragile grounds of the long dead modernist subject of Lockean possessive individualism. The upshot of this shift is that we should either construct a new vision of the human subject—one that is capable of resisting and creating a world fit for humanity—or consign ourselves to new forms of neoliberal dependency, based on the myth of indigenous resilience.

Notes

1. Mawani, "Specters of Indigeneity," 372.
2. Lea, "Contemporary Anthropologies." As policy reports increasingly stress: "Indigenous, local and traditional knowledge systems (TK/IKS) are recognized by key United Nation forums and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as important resources for climate change adaptation. TK/IKS are also valuable for the prevention or resolution of conflicts trigged by climate impacts and vulnerability." Crawhall, *Indigenous Knowledge in Adaptation*, 1.
3. Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*; Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*; Blaser, "Ontological Conflicts."
4. Lea, "Contemporary Anthropologies."
5. Blaser, "Ontological Conflicts," 554.
6. Ibid. 556.
7. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. As Blaser notes in "Ontological Conflicts," "if the notion of multiple ontologies appears closely associated with indigenous peoples in this article, it is due to my professional trajectory and experience rather than to an implicit claim that there is an inherent association between them" (553).
8. Blaser, "Ontological Conflicts," 552–23.
9. See, for example, Sissons, *First Peoples*.
10. Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, 320. See also Lederman, "Making the Desert Bloom."
11. Lederman, "Making the Desert Bloom."
12. Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 28, ix.
13. Goldstein, "Finance and Foreclosure"; and Porter, "Possessory Politics."
14. Porter, "Possessory Politics," 394.
15. Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire," 6.
16. Reid, *Biopolitics of the War on Terror*.
17. Porter, "Possessory Politics," 397.
18. Ibid.
19. Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 97–103, 108, 126, 121.
20. Ibid., 141, 144, 146, 147, 169, 146.
21. Eileraas, "Sex(t)ing Revolution."
22. Reestorff, "Mediatised Affective Activism."
23. Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession*, 181, 193.
24. Butler, "What is Critique?" 214, 226.

25. Blaser, "Ontological Conflicts," 556. To clarify the issue Blaser cites the phrase of Erich Fox Tree, who as a counterpoint to James Scott's "everyday forms of resistance," argues that the focus should be on "everyday forms of existence" or practices that preserve nonmodern modes of existence but are not intended as resistance but nevertheless defy the modern ontology (ibid., n. 22).
26. Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity."
27. Carrithers, Candea, Sykes, Holbraad, and Venkatesan, "Ontology Is Just Another Word."
28. Candea, in ibid., 175.
29. Holbraad, in ibid., 181.
30. Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity," 549; and Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity," 52.
31. Holbraad, in Carrithers et al., "Ontology Is Just Another Word," 184.
32. Blaser, "Ontological Conflicts," 551.
33. Ibid., 552. See also Mol, *The Body Multiple*.
34. Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity," 52; Berry and Galloway, "A Network," 159; see also Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*; Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.
35. Palecek and Risjord, "Relativism and the Ontological Turn," 21; Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity," 54.
36. Latour, *Facing Gaia*.
37. See, e.g., Nakashima et al., *Weathering Uncertainty*; Hiwasaki et al., *Local & Indigenous Knowledge*; Raygorodetsky, "Why Traditional Knowledge"; Crawhall, *Indigenous Knowledge in Adaptation*; Bohensky and Maru, "Indigenous Knowledge, Science, and Resilience."
38. As stated earlier, *indigeneity* is merely the facade upon which new forms of neoliberal governance are being developed and promoted.
39. Rival, "Resilience of Indigenous Intelligence," 300.
40. IPCC, *Contribution of Working Groups*, 15.6.1.
41. IPCC, "Review of the IPCC."
42. UNFCCC, *Report of the United Nations*.
43. Adger et al., "Human Security."
44. Nakashima et al., *Weathering Uncertainty*, 6.
45. Holbraad, "Can the Thing Speak?"
46. Rival, "Resilience of Indigenous Intelligence," 301–2.
47. Ibid., 306.
48. Graham, "Some Thoughts," 189.
49. Gibson Graham and Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics."
50. See also Graham, "Some Thoughts," 183.
51. Rival, "Resilience of Indigenous Intelligence," 310, 308–9.
52. Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen, "Biopolitics of Resilient Indigeneity."
53. Chandler and Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject*; Chandler, *Resilience*; Reid, "Interrogating the Sustainable"; and Reid, "Politically Debased Subject."
54. Butler and Athanasiou *Dispossession*, 121.
55. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*.
56. See Sabaratnam, "Avatars of Eurocentrism."

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