

## Geography and Indigeneity I: Indigeneity, Coloniality and Knowledge

Sarah A Radcliffe

### Abstract

Why talk of indigeneity rather than of Indigenous peoples? This report examines the critical purchase on questions of inequality, subjectivity and power offered by critical geographies of indigeneity. In comparison with accounts that treat indigeneity as relational with nature and the more-than-human, the report highlights literature that examines indigeneity as relational with deeply historical, institutionalised and power-inflected ontologies. To think about settler colonialism as an ongoing effect not a singular event recognizes how patterns of engagement with and oppression of indigeneity pervade the colonial present and its geographies beyond the specific locales associated with Indigenous peoples. Finally the report examines how indigeneity figures in the geography discipline's knowledge production, and argues that worldly Indigenous ontologies are *theorising* the world precisely because they are forced to apprehend, appraise and then rethink 'universals.'

Keywords coloniality, decolonization, governance of the prior, more-than-human, ontology, settler colonialism

In contemporary Anglophone geography literature,<sup>1</sup> Indigenous peoples as a conceptual and substantive focus appear in two – often quite distinct – registers. On the one hand, they embody non-western culture-natures and, on the other, represent subjects whose experience, social position and placing in the contemporary world at multiple scales engages with questions around modernity and coloniality (cf. Stea and Wisner 1984). This report focuses particularly on the latter strand (while returning at the end to the first) to unpack how geographers extend understandings of indigeneity - especially in relation to its effacement - and how indigeneity is articulated and by whom. Indigeneity does important work in the discipline, not least in relation to themes of the colonial present, more-than-human ontologies, and debates around the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, my three reports will make the case for critical geographies of indigeneity, as although Indigenous peoples now appear frequently in geography, constructive discussions around colonial-settler power and the production of indigeneity do not.<sup>3</sup> As Coombes and co-authors noted in previous progress reports (Coombes *et al* 2012a, 2012b, 2014), geographers engage with Indigenous peoples from a range of poststructuralist perspectives, which continue today. However, over recent years the concept of indigeneity has replaced “Indigenous peoples” as an analytical starting point, marking a shift towards critical analysis.<sup>4</sup> A cross-disciplinary concept, indigeneity refers at its broadest to the quality of being indigenous. Indigeneity can be defined as the socio-spatial processes and practices whereby Indigenous people and places are determined as distinct (ontologically, epistemologically, culturally, in sovereignty, etc) to dominant universals. Historicizing and respatializing subjects through the lens of indigeneity seeks to identify and theorize the relational, historically- and geographically-contingent positionality of what is (known to be) “Indigenous.” The report is structured as follows. First the conceptual basis of indigeneity is outlined, before reviewing recent work on indigeneity's politics in the colonial present. The final section examines the work done in geography by references to “Indigenous peoples” and indigeneity.

## **I What is indigeneity?**

The concept of indigeneity potentially offers an incisive entry-point for analysis of the diverse subjects and institutions who represent themselves or who label (diverse) Others as holding an indigenous quality. As an analytical concept, indigeneity attends to the social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, and epistemic processes through which the meaning of being indigenous in a particular time and place is constructed. As this formulation makes clear, analyses seek to account for indigeneity's production through processual, multi-actor, multiscalar networks and within specific grounded contexts, each with particular configurations of colonial histories, postcolonial modernities, epistemological-ontological commitments, and formulations of difference.<sup>5</sup> Indigeneity is hence a positioning, a relational reading and a producing of difference and subjectivity on/in the body politic that is always embedded in power differentials at multiple scales. Decentering any straightforward category or containment of "Indigenous peoples," the concept signals the need to carefully parse the conditions under which this positioning emerges and how it becomes articulated with positionings of settler, nation-state, development, whiteness, and geographer, among many others.

Hence indigeneity is to Indigenous peoples as cartography is to the earth's surface:

"Like maps, indigeneity also functions as a style and manner of representing the outcomes of specific historical and geographical processes as facts, naturalizing the asymmetries of power characteristic of colonialism through the assertion of an essential connection between place and identity. ... Indigeneity works as a residual category, referring to everything that existed prior to all that is Western or modern [.. yet such] assumed categories and concepts obscure social processes. ... Like maps, indigeneity thus describes a relationship rather than an objective fact, emphasizing the importance of understanding what work those concepts do in terms of the relationships they make possible and what forms of knowledge they produce." (Bryan 2009: 25)

As Joe Bryan's brilliant riff makes clear, indigeneity can only come into being from contested, geographically- and temporally-fixing processes. Indigeneity is produced by particular people and institutions at particular times in power-drenched ways and, like maps, is selective, interested, highly codified, co-produced through routines and technologies, and entails traceable consequences.

So how are we to move forward with indigeneity as a mode of analysis? Selectivity, interests, codification, co-production (perhaps using assemblage theory) and relational articulations seem to be the core analytical tools to hand, each of which I briefly outline and exemplify here. Only particular dimensions of social difference are mobilized as indicators of the quality of indigeneity, in ways that reinforce socio-spatial boundaries. Late liberalism<sup>6</sup> selectively endorses particular features as indicative of a quality of indigeneity (cultural distinctiveness, social networks, environmental knowledges), while demanding of them the necessary configurations of disposition, affect and outlook compatible with hegemonic forms of governance and economy (Andolina et al 2009; Lindroth and Sinevaara 2014). Plurinational Bolivia's governmentality produces indigeneity as a selective positioning in relation to anti-Western climate activism and

territorial sovereignty (Anthias 2014; Zimmerer 2015). Such shifting parameters by which to designate indigeneity are intrinsically bound up with the interests and projects of dominant groups – as much as with the constrained mobility of Indigenous subjects to contest their position. Forms of citizenship that interpellate Indigenous peoples hence have to be considered within the wider legal and governance orders within which they are placed. As scholarship now documents in numerous contexts, a (postcolonial) state's recognition of ethnic diversity or customary justice occurs not on a neutral terrain where Indigenous peoples have equal sovereignty and autonomously determine their social life. As Elizabeth Povinelli so elegantly argues, settler colonialism is predicated upon the “governance of the prior” by which settler legal orders claim sovereignty against which the “prior” subjects' order is relationally non-legal, invalid and mired in collective obligations (Povinelli 2011a, 2011b). Indigenous subjects are hence perpetually ambivalent and uncertainly positioned with respect to citizenship, even as legal geographies (protected areas, indigenous jurisdictions, intercultural education, etc) proliferate and make Indigenous peoples legible to the state and non-Indigenous publics (eg. Coulthard 2014; Yates 2014; Gombay 2015).

Research has also begun to unpack how dominant interests (continuously referring back to questions of rule generated by coloniality-modernity and settler nation-states) become codified and implemented in particular concatenations, reflecting social norms as well as individual and institutional trajectories. Lester and Dussart (2012) trace how colonial officials experimented with and developed modalities of humanitarian governance over Indigenous peoples throughout the British Empire during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, policymakers, state employees, staff at multinational corporations, quasi-governmental agencies, bodies of legislation, civil society and third sector organizations, among many others, seek to identify, organize and mobilize indigeneity to specific ends, and thereby enter into complex fields of influence, delimitation and recognition. While indigeneity can offer a means by which to leverage protection over resources in conditions of inequality and dispossession (eg. LaTorre 2014), other research demonstrates how the state offers ambivalent spaces. While it may seek to elicit non-standard relational dynamics via Indigenous people, it can simultaneously be “working to exclude already existing relational ethics” (Thomas 2015: 5; Horowitz 2015). Nevertheless, decolonial subjects can find (subdued) voice from a position of great ambivalence within settler colonial states (Radcliffe and Webb 2015).

Regimes of managing indigeneity become inexorably bound up with the tools at hand. Whereas Indigenous peoples were controlled historically via routines of education, dress and market rules, geography highlights how new technologies are enmeshed in settler-Indigenous dynamics of spatialization and territorialisation as when the USA's Bureau of Indian Affairs uses GIS (Palmer and Rundstrom 2013), the military builds counter-insurgency procedures in part through mapping indigenous territories (Bryan and Woods 2015), and when genetic information plays an active role in shaping contests over claim, presence and difference in Asia and north America (McHenry et al 2013; Simpson 2014). Late liberalism re-tools coloniality-modernity in its image, demanding types of authenticity, sociality and adaptability from Indigenous subjects (eg. Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2014). The dimensions of selectivity, interestedness, codification, technologies and governmentalities hence come together in particular configurations to produce multiply-inscribed embodiments and relationships through which

indigeneity is understood and lived. Hence in contradistinction to readings of indigeneity as relational only with nature (however broadly and post-humanistically nature might be defined), these accounts stress the deeply historical, institutionalised and power-inflected ontologies through which indigeneity emerges.

Just as powerful actors have reasons for and means of fashioning indigeneity in their mould, so too those labelled Indigenous often have urgent reasons to challenge or reformulate it. Aspirations for change among those subjects require slow and steady effort to build political action and articulate provisional agendas for political transformation. The production of a subaltern or politicized indigeneity hence requires complex, time-consuming negotiations across language, location, citizenship status, histories of resource control, gender, generation and education between diverse subjects, as the emancipatory valence of indigeneity is neither natural nor automatic. Hence geographers pay attention to the multiscale institutional pathways through which Indigenous political demands are devised, shared and create a platform for mobilization. Global international law provides a (albeit universalising) toolkit where indigeneity is neither a self-evident positionality among citizens, nor the basis for governmentality (Baird 2015). Geographers trace the networks through which Indigenous mobilization jumps scale and co-produces local, national and wider space, by showing how networks rely upon institutionally, culturally and racially heterogeneous actors and institutional bases, all variously positioned vis-à-vis indigeneity (Andolina et al. 2009).

According to modernity's geographical imagination, indigeneity is naturalized by its association with a telluric (almost magnetic) attachment to locale, a once pristine place, a reification that establishes perspectives on Indigenous peoples' mobility, spatial practices and subjectivities. In order to bypass such rigid spatial assumptions, Povinelli (2011b: 39-40) treats Indigenous subjects and postcolonial nation-states as "both ... caught in strategic maneuvers around a shared problematic, [both citing] a shared discourse originating in a history that predates both of their emergence" (as the very notion of "Indigenous" could not exist before conquest).<sup>7</sup> The governance of the prior means, however, that settler and Indigenous are "not implicated in the same way or to the same ends" (Povinelli 2011a 14). Indeed forced mobility under coloniality/modernity in the name of political economic and nationalist expansion is intrinsic to indigeneity, reflecting displacement and dispossession and denial of Indigenous co-presence with modernity (Kobayashi and de Leeuw 2010; Mamani Ramírez 2011; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012; Simpson 2014).<sup>8</sup> In such accounts, Indigenous diasporas and urbanization come to the fore as scholarly and public opinion begins to recognize that indigeneity is not on the verge of extinction but coming to a city near you. In a visually striking way, the resource Mapping Indigenous LA documents prior Indigenous habitation in today's Los Angeles and links neighbourhoods with diverse migrant streams from the Pacific and Latin America (*Mapping Indigenous LA* no date). Mobility and diasporas are, it is argued, generators – not destroyers - of indigeneity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Clifford 2013). However urban-based constitutions of indigeneity express coloniality-modernity because indigenous and other actors are not equal contributors to making and unmaking urban citizenship (Walker 2006; Carpio 2011; Bessire 2014). Understanding urban spaces and indigenous ancestral territories/ reservations as relational highlights the ways indigenous mobility is co-constituted with disempowerment, although indigenous agency is documented too. Indigenous experiences of urban spaces are precarious and stigmatizing if not

erased, and shapes access to and rights over health, housing (including social housing), welfare, public space and political representation (Walker and Barcham 2010; James 2012; Christensen 2013; cf. Peters and Anderson 2013).

## **II Indigeneity, effacement and the colonial present**

Thinking about the production of settler colonialism as an ongoing effect not a singular event, permits the recognition that forms of engagement and oppression pervade the colonial present (Veracini 2015). Thinking geographically in turn suggests that the dynamics of coloniality/indigeneity occur not merely in specific 'indigenous' localities; rather, they occur across a wider terrain. Whereas blackness was associated merely with local enclaves before whiteness and racialization were recognized to permeate socio-spatial relations, so too geographers are unpacking how (settler) colonialism underlines dynamics that seem to be far from indigeneity. Geographers also continue to deploy the concept of internal colonialism, referring to enclosed spaces where indigeneity is contained and reproduced (Radcliffe 2015; Palmer and Rundstrom 2013). Indigenous enclaves are thus embedded analytically and empirically within multiscalar dynamics of territorialisation, even if indigeneity is only visible when found in marginal contained places. Such accounts resonate with indigenous theory's critiques of Agamben's notion of spaces of exception (Rifkin 1999; Morgensen 2011). Such recasting of sovereignty's scope and effects contributes to postcolonial discussions of what Sidaway et al term planetary indigeneity (Sidaway et al 2014), and Jazeel terms subaltern geographies (Jazeel 2014). Although critical studies of indigeneity and postcolonialism have distinctive trajectories, they have proven to generate fruitful conversations around colonialism's ongoing objective and subjective effects on indigenous subjects (eg. Coulthard 2014 uses Fanon to examine North American settler indigeneity).

Geographers' focus on these issues still tends to have a geography of its own in that the discipline has tended to focus on Anglophone settler states whereas cognate disciplines work outside British coloniality-modernity (see, from distinct perspectives, Watson 2014; Bessire 2014). Pursuing such lines of enquiry, scholars show how different kinds of indigeneity can be produced and articulated with sub-national regional landscapes and political projects, even across a short period of time (Baird 2015). With its self-declared Indigenous President, Bolivia shows how differentially-positioned forms of indigeneity are produced and spatialized out of historic distinctions between lowland and highland Indigenous groups as well as current geopolitical resource interests and global climate politics (Perreault and Green 2013; Laing 2014).

These points also inevitably raise questions about the ways in which geography produces knowledge about indigeneity and its ramifications, as geography remains deeply complicit in producing essentializing and de-contextualized representations. Cameron et al (2014: 19) signal how indigenous knowledge, beliefs and practices are mobilized within colonial structures of knowledge production. Others argue that settler colonial studies risk re-centring whiteness and disconnecting indigenous experience from black enslavement and anti-black racism (Kobayashi and de Leeuw 2010; Povinelli 2011b; Mahtani 2014: 363). Speaking from a position of indigeneity,<sup>9</sup> Hunt (2014) calls for a justice-based framing of heterogeneous indigenous knowledges to "retain its active, mobile, relational nature", a point which leads to a brief

discussion of how references to Indigenous peoples facilitate certain consequences while closing down others.

### III The difference indigeneity makes<sup>10</sup>

“[I]n whose name does a group of mostly non-Indigenous geographers gather to question the intersections of Indigeneity and ontology, and for what purpose?” (Cameron et al 2014: 20)

In geography’s expansive interests, “indigenous geographical knowledge is often recognized when it helps to solve a problem of governance” (Bryan 2009: 30), a comment as true today as it was over five years ago. Recent geography articles mentioning Indigenous peoples remain centred on discussions of environmental governance (for example, Schroeder and McDermott 2014; Jackson and Palmer 2015). How does this feature reflect certain interests and what consequences does it have for heterogeneous Indigenous subjects and spaces? Certainly the discipline is taking on a heightened public role in part due to (inter)national concerns over climate change. Geography’s standing hence relies upon its status as arbiter of questions around environment, and human/nature relations. Geography’s self-application to this task refers repeatedly to Indigenous peoples and its disciplinary ability to situate human endeavour in relation to a dynamic environment, positioning Indigenous and other subalterns as mere conduits to better solutions while disregarding their disadvantage in producing a world otherwise (Radcliffe 2014; Sundberg 2014). In a different strand, Indigenous peoples are sought out to illustrate non-western MTH engagements, enlivening geographical imaginations even as they downplay the colonial-modern and settler geographies discussed above (eg. Bawaka Country et al. 2015). Whether inspired by MTH theories or environmental governance agendas, researchers avidly seek out ontological diversity. They assume that mainstream academic knowledge unfolds through time, while indigenous knowledge is timeless and transparent for analysis (see critiques in Jackson 2014; in anthropology, Todd 2014). If geographical writings position themselves between indigenous knowledge and policy proposals for the Anthropocene, there is a risk of reinstating a universal human figure as equally guilty/equally vulnerable, and of disregarding Indigenous subjects’ problematic relationship with colonial modernity.

In response, some call for geography to engage with diverse, *non*-Indigenous ontologies rather than constantly revisiting the indigenous slot (Gergan 2015).<sup>11</sup> Taking this forward, critical geographies of indigeneity insist upon querying the ways universal (*aka* colonial) ontologies operate on Indigenous subjects and spaces, such as through a register of welfare, military security, or humanitarianism. Working up from domestic spaces and government offices, Sarah de Leeuw (2014) demonstrates forcefully how Canadian child welfare protection that decides whether Indigenous families are “failing” relies upon commonsense, “ignorance [that is] not expressly interrogated as ontological” and so perpetuates colonial logics. Bryan and Wood (2015) analyze how participatory mapping techniques, relied upon by Indigenous peoples in struggles over land and territory, are historically enmeshed in genealogies of colonial rule and counterinsurgency. In the latter example and elsewhere, Indigenous ‘ontological’ positionings – each with their own historize-able patterning – become mixed and interpenetrated with colonial-modern ones in ways that quickly move them beyond the logics of law, development or welfare, and beyond any reasonable attempt to discern a discrete way of seeing the world (eg. Gombay 2015). Indeed, such worldly Indigenous ontologies are engaged in *theorising* the world and

devising alternative directions precisely because they are forced to apprehend, appraise and then rethink ‘universals’ (Byrd 2011; Radcliffe 2015).

#### IV Conclusion

Building on postcolonial and settler colonial analysis, indigeneity has become an incisive framework to explore the always-in-production-and-spacing dynamic of power and difference signalled by Indigenism and a critical vantage point on dominant narratives around the nation-state, humanitarianism, postcolonial subalterns, and the more-than-human. If indigeneity provides a means to speak about these themes it raises the possibility of a critical geography of indigeneity, a reorientation of Indigenous geographies towards thinking through how indigeneity is made as such. Such theorizing highlights how authenticity and ‘prior presence’ are less relevant than the forms of power and economy that produce indigeneity continuously in relation to non-indigenous subjects, sovereignty, environment, the academy, and policy. Nevertheless, critical geographies of indigeneity could engage more with planetary landscapes where indigeneity’s production makes sense to particular actors and institutions for particular interests.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, a conversation with critical race theory might unpack some of the ways in which racialized exclusions and epistemic violence are perpetuated beyond and within the discipline.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In light of this journal's predominantly Anglophone readership, I cite English-language material although I remain informed by multidisciplinary Spanish language work.

<sup>2</sup> For initial thoughts on the difference indigeneity makes, see Radcliffe 2014, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> The second report will examine the intersectional production of heterogeneous indigeneity across diverse scales and linking questions of sovereignty with the body. The third report will turn to questions of value, especially as articulated across diverse political economies and under renewed imperial expansionism into territories previously left for indigenous inhabitation.

<sup>4</sup> Indigeneity is not capitalized as it refers to a socio-spatial field, not a particular group.

<sup>5</sup> The second progress report will argue that indigeneity is inherently intersectional, always produced within -- and in relation to -- hierarchies of gender, race-ethnicity, class, location, sexuality and other meaningful difference.

<sup>6</sup> Povinelli (2011:25) defines late liberalism as "the shape that liberal governmentality has taken as it responds to a series of legitimacy crises in the wake of anticolonial, new social movements, and new Islamic movements".

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<sup>7</sup> In this way, critical accounts of indigeneity provide a specific insight into the Anthropocene's temporality (thanks to Lizzie Richardson for pointing this out).

<sup>8</sup> Taken to a logical limit, such insights raise profound questions about how extending indigenous durable presence is actually produced (since it cannot be taken for granted), and specific concatenations of social reproduction, legal designation of lands, articulations of indigeneity as self-referential, and dominant (anti-indigenous) articulations of society-space.

<sup>9</sup> Several authors cited here speak from an indigenous positionality, including Coulthard, Rivera Cusicanqui, Mamani Ramírez, Christensen, Simpson, Todd, and Tuhiwai Smith.

<sup>10</sup> The subheading references my discussion of these themes in post-neoliberal Ecuador (Radcliffe forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> The productivity of such conversations depends upon engaging how scholars use and define ontology. Whereas some geographers draw on science and technology studies, critical geographers of indigeneity tend to draw on settler colonial and decolonization studies (see Cameron et al 2014).

<sup>12</sup> A growing body of work addresses the longstanding significance of indigeneity in Latin America's postcolonial – and now self-proclaimed decolonizing – nation-states, and the rising valence of indigeneity to Asia's and Africa's political struggles and contests over presence and power.