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Indigenous Urbanization in Amazonia: Interpretive Challenges and Opportunities

By

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ON JUNE 12, 2014, BEFORE AN AUDIENCE of millions watching the opening match of the World Cup in São Paulo's Corinthians Arena, a 13-year-old boy raised a small red banner above his head, on which the words "Demarcação já!" (Demarcation now!) were painted in black (see Figure 1). The boy had been chosen, with two teenagers of African and European ancestry, to signal Brazil's legendary racial harmony to the global football audience. But in unfurling his banner, young Werá Jeguaka Mirim injected real politics into the sanitized and controlled FIFA-sponsored event. Hailing from the Krukutu aldeia on the southern side of greater São Paulo, Werá's protest was aimed at drawing attention to the Proposed Constitutional Amendment (PEC) 215, currently under discussion in the Brazilian Congress. Backed by agribusiness and mining industries, PEC 215 would effectively halt the process of recognizing and demarcating indigenous territories throughout Brazil by moving these responsibilities from the executive to the legislative branch of government. Nationwide, some 600 demarcation plans are pending, including those covering young Werá's Krukutu homeland, which has effectively been incorporated into São Paulo's sprawling conurbation. Subjecting each of these—and potentially hundreds more traditional claims to territory—to a congressional vote makes it likely that a populist logic will be injected into indigenous matters, in a "greater good" argument put forward by cynical and moneyed interests that covet territorial expansion into indigenous lands.

The debate over PEC 215 in Brazil—a clash that purports to stack modernity and democracy on one side versus indigenous sovereignty and cultural integrity on the other—has correlates throughout South America, from the oil fields of Peru and Ecuador to the expanding soy frontiers of Paraguay. In each national instance, the designation of land is linked to a question of cultural identity: where indigenous rights are constitutionally guaranteed, the entire body politic lunges

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Figure 1 *Werá Jeguaka Mirim at the World Cup, São Paulo. Source: Reuters, June 12, 2014.*

to take a position on who, exactly, is a real Indian. In the days after his World Cup demonstration, Werá was denounced by detractors alleging that he was an Indian out of place, playing up a long-extinct culture for the camera in a hopeless attempt to get rights to land—urban land—that could never again be the basis of an autonomous culture (see Coutinho 2010). Admirers pointed out that the Krutkutu, like many dozens of communities in both urban and rural areas, have only recently regained a legal basis for claiming distinct identities, and even amidst these advances are still contending with the legacy of prevailing narratives regarding race, racial blending, and cultural dissolution (French 2009).

At the heart of South America's largest city, in the midst of the world's most extravagant media event, Werá's defiant act proves good to think with, and not only in the debates over territory and communal rights taking place in capitals and provincial towns throughout the region. Even anthropology is haunted by the categorical difficulties at work in the 21st century contests over territory, ethnic identity, and political rights. In the first instance, the field continues to confront what might

be termed a topographical challenge, which echoes the popular sentiment that an Indian living outside the trappings of a stereotypical village is somehow less “real.” While generations of anthropologists have rightly critiqued the simplistic notion of cultural authenticity embedded in the “Indian out of place” thesis, anthropologists nevertheless often default to a conceptually bifurcated world of village/city or homeland/nation-state that leaves a strong cord in place between identity and territory. Other topographic concepts—beyond the pairing of urban with modern, tribal with traditional—need to be crafted so that anthropologists might make some inroads into the zero-sum public discourse on culture and territory. Thinking with Wera’s gesture—and with the rich ethnographic material presented in the four papers in this issue on “Indigenous Urbanization”—can lead us to a more useful vocabulary with which to reckon and discuss how space becomes meaningful for indigenous communities. Here arises a second interpretive challenge for anthropology, which these articles are quick to take up: how might we understand the meaning of Wera’s gesture, without being limited to its instrumentality as a political act? In Amazonia and beyond, indigenous groups have organized in myriad ways to achieve political goals—not least of which, as McSweeney and Jokisch (2007) have pointed out, is the rural-to-urban migration of leaders looking to influence national and regional policy. But the meaning of an action is not exhausted by its function: actions are pursued by embodied, sensate individuals who inhabit various, emerging positions vis-à-vis others. Grasping daily life requires attending to the specificities and surprises entailed in indigenous urban experience, as Indians construct and inhabit their own routes of meaning through urban spaces. Various strains of poststructural thought furnish models of subjective experience, but the challenge for Amazonian ethnography—let us call it the cosmopolitan challenge—is to not let familiar celebrations (or condemnations) of modernity or globalization wash out the specific contours of indigenous lives and livelihoods in cities.

The articles in this collection draw on diverse ethnographic material from throughout the Amazon basin and chart fresh approaches to anthropology’s troubles with topography and cosmopolitanism. They do so by employing a variety of frameworks and theoretical traditions that, collectively, illuminate fascinating empirical phenomena and challenge the reader to think in world-historical, highly idiosyncratic, and personal terms about indigenous urbanization in Amazonia. The demographic trends involved in indigenous migration to Amazonian cities (especially Brazil and Peru) have been the subject of academic study for nearly two decades, and early research demonstrated how state-led development programs and infrastructure projects drove unprecedented urbanization in the last quarter of the 20th century (Browder and Godfrey 1997). Authors saw the incongruity of these “rainforest cities” as an indictment of development and globalization—processes that were systematically disrupting indigenous lives while

offering little in the way of improved livelihoods. Indeed, migration to Amazonian cities surged as smallholder colonization projects failed, leaving speculators and agribusiness to dominate rural areas (see Campbell 2014). But as McSweeney and Arps point out in a field-defining article, the “dynamics and outcomes of [indigenous] migrations are distinct from those of other rural Latin Americans” (2005:159). Indigenous urbanization, it seemed, followed a logic distinct from the migratory pathways that many peasant groups took, fleeing both rural violence and declining returns on agrarian investment. Scholars interested in the growing indigenous presence in cities correctly saw the movement to, from, and within cities as in keeping with longstanding mobility and territorial management strategies (Pinedo-Vasquez and Padoch 2009). The strategic horizons that the city offered for indigenous migrants were not only distinct from those of other migrants, but cities were just one set of territorial circumstances in which indigenous groups continued to engage in diverse “post-traditional” environments (Peluso and Aleixades 2005). Most importantly, this early ethnographic work on urban indigenous communities rejected the thesis that mobility equated to a loss of identity, but proposed instead that we understand how cities become resourceful spaces in the struggle for indigenous autonomy and cultural preservation.

In this volume, Kendra McSweeney and Brad Jokisch put forward a direct argument against those who would assume indigenous urbanization to be “generic, inevitable, and ultimately disempowering” to native peoples. They demonstrate that the urbanization of Amazonia’s indigenous communities is inextricably linked to native political struggles over rights to territory: leaders forge migration chains that link villages and provincial towns to national capitals and global cities, and in turn, cities serve as incubators of ethnic political movements that point back to homelands. This dynamic is distinct from the push-pull factors understood to drive much urbanization in Latin America. Rather than being forced by ineluctable economic forces, indigenous leaders are here seen as “strategic urbanizers” who aim to strengthen economic, political, and cultural ties within their own territories through advocacy work in cities. William Fisher’s paper on Canela appropriations of urban spaces in Maranhão extends the claim that cities hold strategic import for indigenous groups. Far from destroying the Canela social order, ties to urban markets, credit, and political connections have enabled Canela elders to expand and enhance ceremonial life—the key element in the social reproduction of Canela age-sets and ranks. Counterintuitively, indigenous manipulation of urban resources militates *against* out-migration from Canela villages, and as Fisher brilliantly argues, this is not an effect of urban political mobilization but rather a by-product of the Canela’s strategic engagement with the regional economy. Taken together, McSweeney and Jokisch’s and Fisher’s offerings boldly address the topographic challenge by showing how indigenous identities and livelihoods are forged amidst

mobility and translocationality: urban life can strengthen both ties to villages and claims on ancestral territory.

The argument is similar to that which Reyna Ramirez uses to describe Pauite and other western North American indigenous peoples' peripatetic lives. Ramirez coins the topographic concept "native hub" to mark "the importance of Indians' relationship to *both* homeland and diaspora," for in the hub "Native Americans' interactions with each other in the city and on the reservation can transform and rejuvenate tribal identity" (2007:11, 12). The concept of the "hub" is capacious enough to hold together the concomitant processes underway in village, urban, and suburban indigenous networks into one figure for analysis across time and space. Crucially, the hub or network can complement the topographic figures of nation and homeland in ways that are urgently relevant for indigenous peoples: even well-meaning policy texts frame migration and multisited communities as evidence of culture loss (McSweeney and Jokisch, this volume), in part because of a sociological vocabulary limited to modernist figures of territory-bound identities. Ethnographers of Amazonia are well-practiced at demonstrating how cultural identity can emerge from a variety of sources, but the modern nation-state's privileging of "the territorial" demands that indigenous leaders engage in strategic essentialism to preserve territorial claims. Still, we risk much by forging only topographic figures that slot indigenous culture into traditional territories, leaving those living "off reservation" occluded from analysis and orphans of politics.

One exit from the territorial conundrum is to fully embrace deterritorialization and cosmopolitanism as analytic benchmarks, emphasizing that indigenous subjectivities are not particularly bound to territory at all. This is perhaps a tempting line to take, but as both Daniela Peluso's and Janet Chernela's articles beautifully demonstrate, indigenous cosmopolitanism emerges through embodied, experienced, and historically situated practices that include the navigation of cityscapes. These essays go some distance to opening up a new and exciting field in Amazonian studies: rich and detailed descriptions of how indigenous peoples, as Peluso puts it, "craft rural and urban aspects of self," which they then "strategically deploy" across a range of novel spaces and social situations. Once again, there is a necessary attention to strategy—indigenous migrations and urban livelihoods must always, it seems, be reckoned within the broader political field—but here the emphasis shifts toward how urban life becomes domesticated within indigenous lives and practices, rather than the other way around. For Peluso and Chernela, the fact that the city is a strategic resource is the starting point of analyses that reveal—through a sustained attention to practice (with clear influences from Bourdieu and deCerteau)—the particularly indigenous character of cosmopolitanism in Amazonia.

Chernela focuses on the "direction of existence" undertaken by a group of Tukanoan women who endured forced assimilation in Manaus only to create "new

collectivities and spatialities” by resignifying urban icons and duping non-Indian others. Chernela’s long acquaintance with this group of women, coupled with her keen ethnographic eye, allows us to follow the construction of a Tukanoan Women’s Association against the backdrop of Manaus’s halting history as the city of rubber boom excesses and neoliberal free trade zones. These women manipulate an “embodied iconicity” of essentialized Indianness to achieve strategic goals in the city, but the shared “duping” of non-Indians forges a collective bond that gains expression in a new space, which serves as “a retreat from the colonized spaces in the center”. Peluso echoes and strengthens this argument—that urban life can be fashioned to produce novel and even liberatory horizons for indigenous socialities—in her account of how Ese Eja inhabit the Puerto Maldonado cityscape or, rather, the “city-escape”. With a similar attention to how social practice is thoroughly embodied and emplaced, Peluso’s account stresses how young Ese Eja people come to desire urban lifestyles as a chance to unburden themselves from social obligations or tarnished reputations. Strikingly, these young people see no contradiction between city and village life, and come to define the city as a place for “strengthening links rather than disjunctions”. Furthermore, Peluso argues that the cosmopolitan practices of young Ese Eja people “do not denote rupture from ideas of community or indigeneity”; rather, paraphrasing an Ese Eja oral history, Amazonian indigeneity can express a more global sense of belonging while also being locally significant. This is cause for admiration on the part of the ethnographer, and can also be useful in crafting analytical terms that can illuminate the turbulent concurrence of urbanization and resurgent indigenous identities.

This “indigenous cosmopolitanism” (the term is borrowed from Biolsi 2005) enables an ethnographic account of the historical roots of identity and practice that simultaneously attends to how urban residence offers new opportunities for cultural innovation. Like “native hubs,” “indigenous cosmopolitanism” describes an empirical reality that is at odds with the ethnic and topographic standbys so commonly used to discuss indigenous issues in Latin America. In her recent reflections on indigenous politics in the South American highlands, Marisol de la Cadena usefully writes that “indigeneity exceeds the notion of politics as usual,” in part because indigenous politics conjures an arena of engagement far more diverse than the standard political schema, which aims to peg ethnicities to homelands (2010:364). Indigenous politics is certainly this—and analysts and advocates are obligated to produce work that does not muddy territorial claims or unwittingly contribute to the “Indian out of place” mystique—but indigenous politics is also about bodily practices, habits, and cosmological principles that are not easily assayed with the figures of contemporary political speech. Anthropology must craft tools and methods that are appropriate for understanding novel sociocultural forms, which is work that these articles unflinchingly pursue. Wera’s bold call for demarcation before the World Cup audience resonates with the liberal

imagination (i.e., native peoples have rights to traditional homelands), but that same imagination can prove unhelpful if indigenous actors must submit to rigid suppositions about territory and community. The growth of native populations in Amazonian cities is an opportunity to investigate the subtler points of strategy and practice entailed in indigenous urbanizations; the authors collected here have enriched our knowledge and the tools with which we might activate the findings in the world.

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