

# Re-interpreting Political Spaces through Native American Spatialities

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At the beginning of 2020, culturally important lands and burial sites of the Tohono O'odham tribe along the American-Mexican border, began to be blasted and bulldozed by contractors employed by the federal government of the United States. This destruction of cultural property was a consequence of the American President's much cited campaign promise of the construction of a great American wall along the Mexican border. While the wall has invited plenty of criticism for its illiberal and undemocratic characteristics, a much less mentioned ill-effect is that of the physical and permanent divide the wall creates, not only between tribal members living across state lines but also between cultural holdings on either side. However this is not the first time that physical walls have played a part in disrupting Native American spaces. During the late 17th century, the Dutch 'purchased' the island of *Manna-hata* or Manhattan as we know it now, from the Lenape tribe through a payment of beads and other trinkets. This transaction however was perceived by the Lenape people as a deal to share the land, prompting the Dutch to build a wall around the island and forcibly relocate the Lenape to other parts of the country.

Walls are usually only perceived in international relations as a symbol of the economic and cultural anxieties that plague the communities living both inside and outside the wall. The past of the geographies these walls occupy and the spaces they used to function as, are never questioned or remarked upon. The absence of such discourses is especially harmful to regions that have been the victims of settler colonialism and only adds to the erasure of their existence in contemporary socio-political discussions. Through this paper I would like to look at the temporality of geopolitics and how geographical understandings can be drastically different across cultures that inhabit the same spaces. By juxtaposing theories of spatial justice, Marxist geography and Native American interpretations of cartography with current neoliberal ideas of borders, walls and multiculturalism, I would like to argue that contemporary world politics and international relations needs to be looked at through such an intersection of several non-realist lenses. These alternative interpretations that engage with spatiality as an active force is essential to the deconstruction of conventional neo-liberal understandings of democracy and human rights.

The organization of space, especially in the context of walls and boundaries in the 21st century, are often only understood in the strict dichotomy of us and the other or the inside and the outside. These dichotomies also seem to be broadly understood as being permanently etched into the fabrics of our societies, instead of being highly malleable in nature. However this paper draws on Bell Hooks' article *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*, where she suggests that there is nothing intrinsically inside or outside about any location, and that these distinctions with its hierarchies, are created as a result of social and historical processes. This idea has also been the center of many works on the importance of a spatial turn in political science put forth by thinkers like Lefebvre and Foucault. Lefebvre in his book, *The Production of Space*, 'called for a greater understanding of space as a lived space and therefore all of us are individually and collectively, spatial as well as temporal and social beings' (Soja, 2016).

Foucault, on the other hand, goes further by introducing a new spatial type called the heterotopia, or spaces for the culturally, institutionally and discursive other. The utopian space, which is a much more familiar concept, is considered as a closely related counterpart to the heterotopia, and Foucault writes that both these spaces "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Soja, 2016). These alternate understandings allow

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for a shift in meaning for spaces like the US-Mexico border wall or the island of Manhattan, that are classically only understood as neoliberal or multicultural representations of the world order. These spaces now become highly heterogeneous spaces, shared by multiple communities with multiple histories each of which have differing starting points.

It is this understanding of the world being a web of deeply networked and interconnected spaces and time periods that not only move forward, but can also be super-imposed on each other, while not being reduced to a singularity, that gives rise to the idea of spatial justice. Edward Soja, a major proponent of the essential need for spatial justice, criticizes the widely accepted and standardized aspatial and ahistorical notions of justice, such as the political theory of distributive justice by John Rawls. Rawls does not place any emphasis on geographical and temporal characteristics that may determine the distribution of justice and instead only focuses on social stratification (Soja, 2016). His hypothetical space called the original position and the veil of ignorance from behind which principles of justice are decided by the people also do not even begin to challenge the inequalities that have created the need for this question of distributive justice itself. Spatial justice, therefore brings a much needed alternative to Rawls' concept of distributive justice and also makes space for Foucault's ideas of heterotopia and utopia.

The US-Mexico border wall and Manhattan are both representations of the good life, albeit drastically contrasting ones. While the wall represents the call for an America for white Americans and Manhattan represents the fulfillment of Lady Liberty's call for immigrants and multiculturalism, these utopias are both representative of the erasures of Native American histories and spaces. Native American spaces therefore become the heterotopias, with burial grounds being relegated to spaces of destruction, museums showcasing Native American art becoming heterotopias of time and Native American reservations and boarding schools becoming heterotopias of deviance. Apart from these categorical relegations that different Native American spaces occupy, their very existence itself is what Foucault called a heterochronia, which are spaces 'that form an absolute break with time, accumulate time or are linked to time fleetingly' (Sudradjat, 2012). What this means is that the erasure of indigenous spaces does not only mean their identities have been assigned to stay in the peripheries, but also that they are objects to be viewed, analyzed and dissected as remains of an unconnected past. They are therefore spaces that can simultaneously be isolated and penetrable, and for this very ambiguity is given a space outside of present time and space. The question thus arises as to why Native American heterotopias are not given the same consideration and protection that utopias receive. It also brings up questions as to why utopias cannot be inclusive of such heterotopias.

An emblematic characteristic of the neoliberal utopia in the 21st century is that of upholding human rights and dignity throughout the world, with those versions of the good life that blatantly oppose this, being met with outrage and horror. Ironically, the setting of certain standards and methodologies for arriving at these ideals has been the most emphasized in the Global South, where historically these ideals had been razed to the ground by intervening powers. The historical trajectories of these regions have forced them to be late entries to the global network of industrialized nation-states, often creating a conundrum that places the achievement of development goals on one scale and the perusal of human rights on the other. States in the Global North have also largely been exempt from many of these ideals when regarding minorities in their own countries as well as with regards to foreign interventions for the sake of self-preservation. The neoliberal utopia is therefore a realm that is non-intersectional and non-universal, despite its many self-proclamations. The entrenchment of these aggravations in the conventional neoliberal interpretations of a globalist utopia, therefore does not allow for the inclusion of Native American or other kinds of heterotopias. The unlearning of these normative structures and their subversion, therefore becomes essential.

## Alternate Understandings and Structurings of Native American Spaces

The relegation of Native American spaces as othered spaces for contemporary American geographical conceptualizations can only be understood by looking at the European invaders' objectives for territorial expansionism across the Americas. Settler colonialism and its eliminatory nature has often been linked to race and mass genocide, but is not usually seen in the context of access to territoriality, or as Patrick Wolfe put it 'settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event' (Wolfe, 2006). The 'discovery' of a new world prompted European forces to view Natives as uncivilized people whose relationships with their land could very easily be superseded. The disparate ideas of transaction and exchange values were also expropriated by different European

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powers to claim territorial control for their respective sovereigns across the ocean. This desire for control over territoriality also translated into control over natural resources like water and agricultural land. With the expansion of settler populations, it became important to take dominant control of even more land and introduce European agricultural practices at the expense of Native American labor and livelihoods. The introduction of these primary European activities then led to the creation of networks of labor and capital accumulation not only from the subjugation of dispossessed indigenous communities but also the subjugation of forcefully relocated African slaves. This unequal restructuring and reordering also invisibilised these communities and their histories in the process of building the modern nation-states, like the United States of America, further attacking their personhood.

The immediate requirement for spatial justice can be further understood by emphasizing and integrating geographical theories that are rooted in spatial and temporal currents. Marxian geography is one such sphere of knowledge that sees human beings' relationship with each other and with the natural world in the context of economic power structures and its differential relationship with spaces. In accordance with Karl Marx's views that the Capitalist mode of production is inherently unequal and that the commodification of human labor leads to interclass and intraclass struggles, Marxist geography also looks at the social, political and economic environments where this class struggle takes place. The opportunities that their environment either provides them with or does not provide them with, therefore determines whether inequalities are passed on from one generation to another. The Swedish geographer Torsten Hagerstrand's time-space model which describes a "daily-life environment" around a person's place of residence," whose limits are determined by the physical frictions of distance and the socio-spatial frictions of class and race" (qtd in Peet, 2005) is also an integral part of this critical understanding of geography. The building of walls that cut across sacred and domestic spaces are physical manifestations of externally constructed limits that are informed by prejudices of racial and technological superiority, thereby creating "a different sized typical daily prism" (qtd in Peet, 2005) for the Tohono O'odhams and the Lenapes.

The outcomes of the typical environments that these communities occupy in the 21st century are clearly seen in the above national average unemployment statistics across the 27 counties with majority Native American populations. Unemployment rates also exceed 40% on many Native American populations with many of those who are employed being engaged in blue-collar work where there is little protection from arbitrary firing, living wages and development of new skills. (Tapia, 2019) These communities therefore form a disproportionate amount of the industrial reserve army as well as the precariat. While the former refers to those classes of people who can be used and discarded at the will of the capitalist class, the later refers to those who live in a constant state of precariousness. Here it becomes important to state that this state of constant precariousness is a result of a deep ignorance by the state and central governments on the traditional livelihoods and lifestyles of these communities. The violence and mass displacement perpetrated by the very systems they have no choice but to be integrated into, has been completely forgotten and erased. These daily life environments that provide highly precarious labor opportunities leads to the reiteration and repetition of social resources, therefore creating a cycle that is perpetually self-destructive in nature. These environments also occupy hierarchical positions that determine which of them should be included in the template for a future utopia and which ones can be erased.

The question of control over land also extends to other resources that inhabit Native American spaces like water, minerals and also their own bodies. The right to self-determination and sovereignty has been long since been denied to these groups, under the political subjectivities of the nation-state and nationalities. Here too, it becomes important to take into consideration the temporal stability of these ideas of socio-political organization and question the immensity of the role played by imaginary geographies in institutionalizing those structures. However despite these rigid and universal understandings of the political imagination, there are several hypocritical examples of exception from these constructs. Aihwa Ong's description of the prevalent existence of a graduated sovereignty whereby "citizens in different zones who are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits are subjected to different sets of civil, political, and economic rights" (qtd in Biolsi., 2008). This graduated sovereignty given to Native Americans begins with the government's official policy of relocation or the process of moving Native Americans from reservations and into cities for achieving the larger goal of 'terminating these tribes and finally solving the Indian problem.'

More institutionalized forms of graduated sovereignty come in the form of tribal reservations which the US

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government has given legal recognition to be indigenous nations, each with its own culture, language, general autonomy and distinct boundaries. However despite this general sense of autonomy, the US government continues to act as gatekeepers of this status as they have the ability to dilute or even terminate federal recognition of tribes and can even outsource political responsibility for their welfare to the tribes themselves. These reservations also function in a hierarchy, which is most well exemplified in the management of natural resources like fishing, hunting, etc. Therefore these 'semblances of sovereignty' have been constructed and forcefully perpetrated onto Native American spaces without a holistic provision of the fundamental provisions of the idea of sovereignty. By virtue of the integration and acceptance of these communities as American citizens coming with several contingencies and impediments, they are forced to accept these highly unequal and violent political spatializations.

Apart from these abstract economic, social and political aspects of spatiality, the most concrete interpretation of spaces has been through the practice of mapping and cartography. This science has mostly been considered as a neutral pursuit that is strictly informed by scientific measurements and objectivity. However this practice too is very much embedded in social, political and historical contexts and therefore must be looked at through these lenses. Modern cartography was an integral process of the aforementioned development of sovereignty in Europe, and was not only a marker of bordered territories, but also served to identify political spaces and its organization. The rise of the notion of sovereignty and territorial integrity in 1648, followed by the emergence of the nation state in 1922, led to the reorganization of political spaces and the homogenization of such spaces under a universal system of territorial sovereignty. It also came to be used to represent the political authorities over these territories and did not allow for any ambiguity and overlap in their boundaries. Since maps are also classically viewed as accurate representations of a region, it gives them the ultimate authority to produce and reproduce social relations, thereby conveying meanings and perceptions that are linear in nature. Such singular and rigid spatial understandings have largely forgotten about the existence of other interpretations of space and have firmly relegated them to the past. Since maps essentially work in order to communicate information, this becomes significant in the context of how Native American knowledge systems interact with European knowledge systems and vice versa.

Native American maps and their understanding of space is very distinct from European maps. Louis De Vorsey, Jr, in his paper called 'Silent Witnesses : Native American Maps', wrote that 'Native American maps were topological-which meant that they drew land features and scale based on how humans interacted with them instead of how they were situated as compared to other land features'. Another distinct feature of such maps instead of showing the normative boundary details, features enclosed shapes of either oval or circles that represent 'us' or the various Indigenous tribes, whereas rectangles are used to represent 'them' or the Europeans. River systems are also treated very differently by Native American cartographers, where large rivers are shown to be anastomosed- a condition that never occurs in nature as river systems are dendritic in nature. This difference draws from the fact that Native American cartographers, unlike European ones, believed that there was no distinction between land or water trails, and were therefore shown as combined trails. It was the overall transport system that mattered to them and not the different kinds of trails or modes of transport required to travel along these routes. However with the coming of colonial modernity, which is the concept that modernity only co-emerges with coloniality, there was a complete erasure of Native mapping traditions and knowledge systems. This erasure of native knowledge systems has not only caused the effacement of alternate spatial and communicative understandings, but also refuses to acknowledge Native American influences on their maps. The cultural and religious significance of certain spaces and natural resources are also completely ignored here. The decolonizing of geography then becomes essential in order to 'confront and dismantle the 'unbearable whiteness of geography' (Radcliffe, 2017).

Indigenous tribes in the United States of America have been subject to various kinds of atrocities, from genocide and slavery to forced relocation and discriminatory socio-political laws and norms. Despite this long history of systematic violence perpetuated against them, there continues to be a lack of cognizance not only about these bodied interpretations of violence, but also of the spatial violence that occurred and continues to color these communities. These different kinds of violence however are actually rooted in the desires of the settler colonists for land and the subsequent negation of spaces occupied by indigenous communities. This expanded comprehension of violence calls for a form of spatial justice that goes beyond Foucault's interpretation of it. This inclusionary justice should be one that can simultaneously deconstruct, reinterpret and reimagine Native American spaces as an essential component of our imagined utopias. The pursuit of this type of justice also invalidates the supposed value placed on

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human rights and justice by the current neoliberal order. While a realist lens would simply perceive Native American grievances, and especially those that have been experienced in the distant past, simply as a side effect to the state and global perusal of development and modernity. Spatial justice through the lens of Marxian geography and Native American cartography questions these normative concepts themselves. Borders and walls are another neoliberal feature that this paper questions for its violent participation in Native American subjugation. Therefore, the reinterpretation of normative understandings of spatiality and temporality is not only essential for the preservation and development of Native American identities and spaces, but also creates space for more inclusive understandings of human rights.

By bringing in spatial, Marxist, post-colonial and indigenous theories of geography, conventional methods of cartography come to be reimagined. This incorporation forces not only the discipline of geography, but also that of political science and international relations, to challenge itself to get rid of its colonial and neo-liberal sensibilities. Such reinterpretations help bring in indigenous knowledge systems, social organizations and relations, economic structures and management of natural resources into the forefront of the construction of alternate geographies. Therefore, those who have the most stake in the land must be given the right to engage in the establishment of the norms and structures of the global order. At the same time, the integration of such practices like participatory mapping must also not be put under a universal lens, and differential mapping strategies across different communities must be recognized. Such an inclusive system allows us to create a utopia that genuinely focuses on the promotion of human rights and not the performativity of it.

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