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### **Land, Territory, Entropy**

Guillermo Delgado-P.<sup>1</sup>

“Compare the tree to a factory, or a cow to a reactor. Like the people it is not amenable to efficiency and control in a factory sense. You can’t boss over the science of photosynthesis”  
– Nicholas Xenos<sup>i</sup>

In the face of the entropy of the ongoing environmental crisis, it is time to both retrieve and advance indigenous concepts of land. Indigenous peoples commonly privilege the notion that land is a living. Indigeneity privileges a common understanding of territory as a living entity. As Gary White Deer suggests:

“To Native America, the world is composed of both spirit and matter. This, of course, is not a new concept, as the world is full of variations on this common theme. What is important for our consideration is that to Native America, burials are sacrosanct, certain geographies are counted as holy places, and the earth itself is a living entity.”<sup>ii</sup>

This commonality is particular to indigenous thought. After the 1960s, the emergence of peasant movements contributed to the dissemination of this ancient conviction regarding the notion of belonging to the land throughout the world. In Latin America by the 1990s, an indigenous-peasant social movement had repositioned the struggle for land and identity simultaneously with the emerging movement of landless peasants who actively joined contemporary struggles.

Globalization entails concrete challenges to the ways Indigenous peoples conceive permanence on earth. For instance, biotechnology can be considered a strategy to obtain definitive control over biodiversity and traditional ecological knowledges found and

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protected, not coincidentally, in areas inhabited by Indigenous peoples today. The struggle for land became more radicalized as it emphasized a conservationist agenda while critiquing the emergence of genetically modified organisms and the food industry's "globalitarianism." Soon, land-based struggles directed their collective fury against full neoliberal deruralization and dispossession (as has been seen in global summits from Seattle 1999 to Cancun 2003 to Copenhagen 2009).

Indigenous peoples acknowledge a sort of multidimensionality and polyculturality in which terms such as "progress" (as excess) give way to alter-Native thinking inspired in pluriversities and environmental preservation. Hayes and Timms explain, "The idea of humans being part of (rather than in control of) an environmental system has gained increased importance as we recognize the impact of overexploitation of environmental goods and the problems associated with the distribution of those goods to a growing world population."<sup>iii</sup> Yet not only is *land* the issue today, but water and biomass as well. Land struggles, along with water struggles, reach large cohorts of people who offer combative, localized, and vivid examples of how humans belong to the earth, rather than the earth to humans.

### **Cosmic Time and Industrial Time**

As humans, we are impacted by imperiling events—global warming, ocean acidification, ozone layer depletion, atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, nuclear disasters, and cosmic entropy.<sup>iv</sup> Here, we are clearly confronting two or more concepts of time and nature. Not in sync with "cosmic time," "industrial and atomic time" is global society's present context, representing that synchronized time of a society increasingly, and almost consciously, self-destructing itself. So far, the entropic consequences can be called "climate change."<sup>v</sup>

Fifteen years ago, it was affirmed that "(o)n a global scale, scientists estimate that 27,000 species are being lost each year in the rainforests alone... the loss of species through extinction is only one aspect of the biological impairment that has resulted from human destruction of wildlife habitat."<sup>vi</sup> We must remember that humanity needed only two hundred years to trash the habitat we call Earth. These years coincide with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, and although urbanization seems to be a *fait accompli*, large portions of the world remain rural, where peasants following nature's "cosmic time" till the

land to survive and feed the cities for cheap. Because peasants seldom receive social security assistance from the state, this is a very good deal for urban dwellers.

As we noticed previously, Native notions of territory come with a sense of ecological integrity and complexity. For Native peoples, territory has to be preserved and defended as a co-entity in which humans are just other players along with insects, seeds, and water. Descola notes the importance of context in ecological knowledge: “In spite of their internal differences, all [Native Peoples] have as a common characteristic that they do not operate clear-cut ontological distinctions between human, on the one hand, and a good many species of animals and plants, on the other.”<sup>vii</sup>

The Native concept of “territory” runs parallel to the term “land,” yet it has almost disappeared from our epistemology. We must remember that Columbus’s enterprise in 1492 proclaims this word as soon as it glances upon the first signs of what are now called the Caribbean Islands: “Tierra! Tierra!” With these looters also came the term “empty land,” or “wild lands.” At first, they were not so interested in “land,” itself, but rather gold and silver. But as the metals are exhausted, meager, and scattered, “land” becomes the thing to claim and possess.

To conquer and colonize means to appropriate and administer land, and to parcel and fracture territory. As inheritors of colonial history today, we talk about “wild lands,” “empty land,” “virgin forest,” “free land,” “idle land,” “law of the land,” “landscape,” “public land,” “private land.” The word takes on a more abstract meaning—an intangible entity. These terms, relevant to “land” and the commoditization of land, imply a constant subdivision, dangerously disrupting the ecological and self-sustaining complexity of territory. Land fracturing has been the rule since colonial agriculture:

“If the lands were not currently suited to intensive agriculture, cultivation would force the land to submit to the discipline of production. Any reluctance on the part of Indigenous peoples to participate in intensive agriculture or resource extraction was simply more justification for moving them off the land and bringing in European settlers who were ready to use the land productively.”<sup>viii</sup>

In a twist of irony, the demand “to use the land productively” actually backfired, and rates of depletion and fragility dwindle into determinate scarcity. and colonization meant the expropriation of riches, land, territory, and human labor, shaping the accumulation of capital

in a process Marx called “primitive accumulation.” Under “primitive accumulation,” conquest and dispossession create the conditions for the systematic transfer of wealth from one region to another, including labor (the classic example constituting slavery as a mode of production). Primitive accumulation triggered ecological collapse by introducing technologies of systematic depletion often based on monocultures, mining of ores, and transferring of biota (seeds and animals through the manipulation of rivers and construction of dams, etc.). It is this process that is called the ontological transformation of nature. Once the territory has been destroyed, land is good only for “development.”

Physiocrats in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were interested in the value of productive land as agricultural products reached higher demand. But for peasants, land was necessary only to consume nature’s bounty for survival. If surplus was available, then it was shared, stored, or bartered. With the invention of advanced storage systems and food preservation, the emergence of bureaucrats who controlled food surplus, land, and water gave rise to the origin of the modern state, itself. Bureaucracies, priests, and armies were fed, while they accumulated information on land’s productive capacity that, in turn, reproduced control and coercion, suppressing the new “free peasantry.” The “free peasantry,” itself, signified the contestation of two perceptions of time: cosmic time and industrial (computerized or synchronized) time, which is really the control over productivity and the limiting of free time. Because industrial time signifies the domestication of time and the worker, we could probably say that, through it, time became a technology of numbers. On the other hand, “cosmic time” is slow, antiessential, and an obstacle to the purposes of speed, accumulation, and management.

### **Native Land Systems**

The possession of land in the “New World” meant depopulation of First or Original Peoples. That is, to facilitate arbitrary appropriation by systemic dispossession, subversion, and destruction of previous pre-industrial agricultures. Colonialism’s aim was precisely “to dominate nature,” meaning that “there is no nature outside of history, [and] there is nothing natural about nature.”<sup>ix</sup> In Latin America these new possessions of *Terra Nullius* were called “*Encomienda*,” “*Mission*,” “*Mercedes Reales*,” “*Presidio*,” “*Colony*.” All were institutions of dispossession and criminalization based on the acquisition of lands and administration of fractioned territories. These colonial terms required previous pluriversal

indigenous systems of land tenure, such as the Inka's *Ayllu*, the Nahuatl's (Aztec) *Kalpulli*, the Taino's *Conuco*, the Guarani's *Chaco*, to be ignored and substituted by the homogenizing colonial process based on the *Hacienda* and the Plantation.

Let's consider the case of the Inkas. The Quechua term "*Jallpa*" (land) has been historically administered through the *Chakra*, a polyculture plot, by the state-minded Inkas in three ways: one, to satisfy the needs of the *Panakas*, the ruling clans; two, to assure surplus was redistributed throughout the state; and three, to offer the God Sun its share by sending surplus to the temple (heliolatriy), where bureaucrats silently stored it and eventually redistributed it as the "gift of the gods." The idea was to avoid the presence of hunger. In the process, bureaucrats ensured the preservation of territory through the isolation of a portion of land, called the *Sapsi* (commons), ready to be activated if a family or community hit disgrace and could not feed itself. So the *Sapsi* is a traditional place protected as the commons, a territorial reserve that rests until it is worked collectively every seven years. The *Jallpa* of the *Sapsi* are treated as a human being—the *Sapsi* "rests" in order to produce and save the lives of those whose plots failed. Thus, a plot is never exhausted. These examples form the bases of what we think of today as "sustainability."

However, as one important article notes, "sustainability is only important if one is concerned about the quality of life on earth in the future, and individuals, corporations, and governments may ignore potential future problems of resource availability while focused on short-term goals and economic growth."<sup>x</sup> With colonialism, a shift in ekistics (perception of settlement space) came about. The land-to-human ratio was turned on its head.<sup>xi</sup> Crops and livestock from opposite hemispheres affected water kinetics and provoked erosion (think of the feeding habits of a llama versus a goat, pig, sheep, or horse).<sup>xii</sup> On the other hand, the same shifts of land and water use lowered productivity in territories that were previously considered highly productive.

In numerous cases, such upsetting changes involved transferring Originary Peoples as things from the land they inhabited. Thus, several "free peasantries" became the agricultural workers of their own states. The new owner, an *Encomendero*, distorted the land-to-human ratio, because "land grants" farming were based on early forms of monoculture and corvée labor involving sugar, cotton, rice, wheat, potato. The land-to-human ratio was also distorted, because migrating populations from one place to another brought people to unknown territories. Ecological niches and technologies were different, unfamiliar, so

displaced migrants often contributed to deteriorating ecological sustainability by introducing different crops requiring different agricultural technologies (e.g. of irrigation, terracing, fallow lands, raised beds), and finally provoking environmental depletion due to the (mis)use of different agricultural instruments and techniques—for example, the use of digging hoes such as the Andean *Chakit'aglla*, a well adapted digging stick for terrace agriculture where plow and ox were impractical and damaging).

In most areas where the Native Peoples of the Americas have been resilient, “colonial legacies” continue to work against them today. Very rarely do Native Peoples rest on rich lands, for they have been pushed out and ‘removed’ to arid lands. They have been dismembered. This is very contrary to the survival of small bands of hunters and gatherers into the 21<sup>st</sup> century who are aware of the fact that rainforests are not to be cultivated but maintained. Hunters and gatherers plant polyculture gardens sporadically rather than systematically, since their nomadism allows circulation rather than sedentarism. When they plant, they avoid disturbing their environments as much as possible. They know that their environment, as territory, depends on the complexity of the canopy. The phrase, “All our relations,” offered by Native Peoples as a greeting or farewell, relates this symbiosis. Without localized knowledge, the soil becomes automatically infertile, and erodes very fast, turning into sand.

Among the Maya, swidden farming does not just imply clearing the *land*. A producing plot is considered already an infraction against nature, but the true owners—*Yumilo'ob K'axo'ob*, wilderness lords—grant a sort of temporary permit for a plot, a *Milpa*, to be worked. Eventually, the *Milpa* is returned to them, but it is never abandoned.<sup>xiii</sup> Here, there is an obvious need to conserve the “wilderness” (*Yum k'ax*) as a reservoir, or as sp[aces]<sup>xiv</sup> of regenerative fertility connoting dimensions other than notions of “arable land.” Suddenly, the discarded terrain (*el monte*) is the cradle of biodiversity. The Maya scholar Victor Montejo<sup>xv</sup> reminds us of the Mesoamerican Yukatek Maya, who believe in the *Kusansum*, an umbilical cord that connects the earth and the sky. The *Kusansum* reflects the connection not only between all things on earth, but of a greater cosmology.

Amidst the Maori of New Zealand, according to Maori scholar Fiona Cram, “The interconnectedness of life on this planet stems from all species being descended from Papatuanuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father). Everything possesses a *Mauri* (life force), including animals, fish, birds, land, forests, and seas. *Mauri* is the source of the link

between things.”<sup>xvi</sup> But, at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the norm is the persistent resistance of indigenous people against neo-colonial land grabs.

### **Agriculturalist Resistance to Land Grabbing**

As a current study shows, between 1985 and 2007, the expansion of agricultural lands in Latin America was the highest in the world. “[S]pecifically in Bolivia,” the study states, “it went from 13,891 square kilometers to 25,365 square kilometers.”<sup>xvii</sup> But land grabbing is not isolated to Bolivia. One recent case of land grabbing is found in Alto Paraguay, where ancient Amerindians—largely Guaraní—are graphically being expelled from the lands where they lived throughout these last centuries. While today, the African land grab has outpaced Latin America, the outcome remains the same—territories are decimated in a neo-colonial rush for land. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, forms of neo-slavery have been found on lands that are, presumably, part of modern, monocrop capitalism. *The New York Times* reports about 35 enslaved workers in the state of Pará, Brazil:

“Inspectors found the employees on Senator João Ribeiro’s ranch working 78 hours a week with no medical assistance, no days off and living in sub-human conditions. The inspectors found that the workers racked up debts to the ranch for food and equipment, which were deducted from their wages and left them permanently indebted and unable to leave.”<sup>xviii</sup>

It can be inferred that modern capitalism needs forms of enslaved labor through an old system called “debt-peonage”—the never-ending cycle of debt that a plantation or ranch worker enters, very often passing it along to their children. Frequently, in these circumstances, the term “landlessness” crops up at the moment that a tax is imposed on the free agriculturalist, who are usually autonomous peasants.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we must be aware that globalization denotes the last capitalistic movement to commodify everything. As Max Broswimmer explains, “The exploitation of nature was universalized and commodified. In the end, the imperatives of late modernity produced the global framework in which ecocidal tendencies greatly accelerated.”<sup>xix</sup> Here, the processes to commodify land are equal to the destruction of territory. The terms “free land,” “empty land,” “wild lands,” “landscape,” “land development,” acquire new meanings after entering a process of full commoditization including water and air. Just think about the term “urban sprawl,” which Edward Heisel explains, “has even spread into more remote and



scenic regions of the country as Americans have become more mobile and recreational outposts have sprouted into full-fledged cities.”<sup>xx</sup>

But civil societies and their social movements have not remained passive. Indeed, according to Zimmerer, Latin American countries “now account for nearly 15 percent of global coverage of protected areas.”<sup>xxi</sup> Agriculturalists value the notion of community, and reject the full individualist socialization brought in by neoliberalism to areas where reciprocity and recognition of others are privileged as an endeavor between or within human and nature. Knowledge available to unrelenting agriculturalists around the world allows old forms of production that proved reliable or sustainable to be reconsidered.

One European example of *longue durée* land use in Burgundy, France, may show that depletion and exhaustion of the land is not always correlated with European practices like those introduced in the Americas. It is exquisite, as it relates to winemaking, which takes us back to the first millennium AD and the term “clos.” “[*Clos*] designates a walled enclosure that has been distinguished from other plots. The term often suggests that the plot has been valued for its grapes—enough at least to build a wall.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Another positive and more contemporary example of sustainability could be environmentally-friendly and socially-responsible use of privatized lands, small and organic producers of coffee in Costa Rica, Oaxaca, or Bolivia where, aided by fair trade practices, growers are able to sustain their way of life, aware of the fact that their lands are nurtured and their incomes are not inspired by blind maximization of profits but by responsibility and nurturing. In this case, it is the consumer that is also indirectly involved in environmental sustainability.

Zimmerer helps here to distinguish the opposite: “Still, the bulk of expanded export agriculture and new national production has tended, on the whole, to contribute to environmental destruction under neoliberal policies that predominated in [Mexico, Costa Rica, Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia] between 1987 and 2008.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Zimmerer’s observation correlates with a long-term state practice:

“Under the label of ‘government projects for collective well-being,’ indiscriminate intervention into specific ecosystems occupied by indigenous communities from time immemorial, in Mexico and other Latin American countries, has produced severe alterations of those systems and traumatic changes in traditional ways of life.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Agriculturalists are interested in recomposing the subdivided lands, undoing the feuds that created a culture of allotment, giving time for land to be idle, to “rest”. Several plots (*Milpa, Chaqra, Conuco, Chinampa, Kusansum, Chaco*) continued productively in Latin America to this day. The survival of such agriculturalists depends on their ability to remain caretakers of their seeds. Once they lose the preservation and regeneration of seeds, they fall into commercial seed dependency. Thus, the reconstitution of lands includes the *remembering* of territory through such agriculturalism.

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<sup>i</sup> Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity*. New York (Routledge: 1989).

<sup>ii</sup> Gary White Deer. “Return of the Sacred. Spirituality and the Scientific Imperative.” IN: N. Swidler, K. Dongoske, R. Anyon and A. S. Downer (eds.) *Native Americans and Archaeologists: Stepping Stones to a Common Ground*. Walnut Creek (Altamira: 1997). pp. 41.

<sup>iii</sup> James Hayes and Benjamin Timms. “Physical Geography: The Human Environment Connection”. In: *Placing Latin America*. Lanham, MD (Rowman and Littlefield: 2012). Pp. 13.

<sup>iv</sup> I am using the term “entropy” to suggest destruction and bound or unavailable energy in the system.

<sup>v</sup> Nordhaus 2012: 32-34

<sup>vi</sup> Edward J. Heisel. “Biodiversity and Federal Land Ownership: Mapping a Strategy for the Future”. *Ecology Law Quarterly*, Vol. 25. 1998. Pp. 235.

<sup>vii</sup> Philip Descola. “Ecology as cosmological Analysis”. IN: Alexandre Surrallés and Pedro García Huierro (eds.) *The Land Within: Indigenous Territory and the Perception of Environment*. Copenhagen (IWGIA: 2005). pp. 24

<sup>viii</sup> Anne Ross, K.P. Sherman, J.G. Snodgrass, H.D. Delcore, and R. Sherman. *Indigenous Peoples and the Collaborative Stewardship of Nature: Knowledge Binds and Institutional Conflicts*. Walnut Creek (Left Coast Press: 2010).

<sup>ix</sup> Arturo Escobar. “After Nature: Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology”. *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 40:1. February 1999. pp. 2.

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<sup>x</sup> Hayes and Timms, 13

<sup>xi</sup> Sofía Monsalve Suárez. “Gender and Land.” In: Peter Rosset, Raj Patel, and Michael Courville (eds.). *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform*. Oakland, CA (Food First Books: 2006). pp. 192-207

<sup>xii</sup> Richard P. Schaedel “Late Incaic and Early Spanish Changes in Land Use: Their Effect on Dry Land, The Peruvian Coast.” *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv*. (N.F.) Jg 7 (H. 3). 1981. pp. 309-319

<sup>xiii</sup> Alejandra García-Quintanilla. “El Dilema de Ah Kimsah K’ax, “El que mata al Monte”: Significados del Monte entre los Mayas Milperos de Yucatán”. *Mesoamerica*, Vol 39. 2000. Pp 267, 283, 285

<sup>xiv</sup> Guillermo Delgado-P. “Bordering Indigeneities. Two Notes on Decolonization and Sp/1/ace.” *Indigenous Research Center of the Americas*. Davis (University of California: 2009).

<http://irca.ucdavis.edu/2009/12/bordering-indigeneities-two-notes-on-decolonization-and-splace/>

<sup>xv</sup> Victor Montejo. “The Road to Heaven: Jakaltek Maya Beliefs, Religion, and Ecology.” In: *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*. John A. Grim (ed.). Cambridge, MA (Harvard Divinity School: University of Harvard Press). Pp. 181.

<sup>xvi</sup> Fiona Cram. “Backgrounding Maori Views on Genetic Engineering.” IN: Joanne Barker (ed.) *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*. Lincoln (University of Nebraska Press: 2005). Pp. 54.

<sup>xvii</sup> Karl S. Zimmerer. “‘Conservation Booms’ with Agricultural Growth? Sustainability and Shifting Environmental Governance in Latin America, 1985-2008. (Mexico, Costa Rica, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia).” *Latin American Research Review*. Vol 46. Pp. 102.

<sup>xviii</sup> *New York Times*. February, 25, 2012 A5

<sup>xix</sup> Franz J. Brosimmer. *Ecocide: A Short History of the Mass Extinction of Species*. Virginia (Pluto Press: 2002). Pp. 10.

<sup>xx</sup> Heisel, 231

<sup>xxi</sup> Zimmerer, 83

<sup>xxii</sup> Coover 2004: 190

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xxiii Zimmerer, 81

xxiv Ángel Julián García-Zambrano. "Calabash Trees and Cacti in the Indigenous Ritual Selection of Environments for Settlement in Colonial Mesoamerica." In: John A. Grim (ed.) *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*. Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press: 2001). Pp. 351.

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