“Imperialist Goats” & Tanzania’s Oct. 28 Elections

Jia Hui Lee
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If you look at one of those world maps that show where Covid-19 cases are currently spiking, you will notice that the United Republic of Tanzania is usually represented without color. This is because Tanzania stopped publishing case tallies on April 29th. By June 8th this year, President John Pombe Magufuli declared that the coronavirus has been eliminated from the country. Breaking a 2020 electoral trend, Tanzanians will vote on 28th October in elections that has little to

do with how the government has handled the pandemic. They will choose between Magufuli, running as the incumbent, and fourteen opposition candidates, including Tundu Lissu, in elections that are being framed as a referendum on Magufuli's anti-imperialist development plan.

One of the key and more controversial issues being contested in this week's elections is "*ubeberu*" or "imperialism." *Beberu* means billy-goat in Kiswahili and it is easy to understand why the word aptly describes imperialists. Billy goats butt their heads aggressively as a way to bully, establish dominance, fight, and mate. Julius K. Nyerere, the country's first president, popularised the term *beberu* when he used it to describe European nations and the United States. In his 1972 speech, "Binadamu Wote in Sawa" ("All People are Equal"), Nyerere condemned racism and the war in Vietnam, viewing both as symptomatic of a dehumanising, Euro-American imperialism.

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In recent speeches and campaign events, Magufuli has brought "*beberu*" back into currency. He has accused Lissu and other opposition leaders of working for imperialist forces. He cites the example of an opposition lawmaker who told the World Bank to withhold funding from Tanzania until the government addresses its human rights violations. They are imperialist "puppets," according to the President, and he insists that the opposition's business-friendly policies on mining harken back to the days of colonial exploitation.

Although *beberu* has entered political speeches only in recent months, Magufuli has long relied on the language of decolonisation to frame his record as the leader of Tanzania's government. Imperialism, for Magufuli, is responsible for a range of things, including the recommendation to wear masks during the Covid-19 pandemic, the unfair terms of tanzanite and gold exports, and Tanzania's status as a "low income" country.

In many ways, the return of anti-imperialist discourse is apt. When Magufuli was elected to the presidency in 2015, he ushered in a new kind of politics that questioned the preceding two decades of neoliberal economics that encouraged vast privatisation and increased Tanzanian dependency on foreign multinational corporations. His reinvention of decolonial politics pervaded daily conversations during the time I lived in Morogoro, Tanzania from 2016-2019, when I conducted research about human-animal sensing technologies.

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During my time in Tanzania, I found that Magufuli's willingness to stand up to mining companies was extremely popular. The lab technicians and animal trainers I worked with praised his efforts to compel foreign companies to renegotiate their contracts with the government under new mining and prospecting laws. They particularly liked that Magufuli ordered that walls be built around tanzanite mines so that the government can better monitor the flow of precious metals. For far too long, people told me, foreign mining companies have exploited Tanzanian minerals and workers at low prices only to make huge profits when the minerals were processed and sold elsewhere. They have stolen from Tanzania, they said. A similar critique of the roles played by Western and rising Asian economies in underdeveloping Tanzania infuse many of Magufuli's speeches, and he used them frequently to justify the government's industrialisation plans. These plans require that foreign companies process the minerals within the country before export.

In May 2018, Magufuli visited Morogoro, and the city was awash with anticipation. He had just come from officiating the newly-built Kilombero bridge, and he made a pitstop at the Sokoine University of Agriculture to listen to students and deliver a speech. On the day of his highly anticipated visit, the enthusiasm and excitement were palpable. My colleagues at the animal training site left work to attend his speech right after morning tea. I followed them, and later, joined a jovial crowd of people who had gathered in a field to listen to

Magufuli. He was charismatic, deftly weaving together jokes and policy, each time garnering laughs and cheers from a rapt audience. “Why do we grow cotton here, then send the raw materials abroad, [where they make and] wear the clothes, and then they send it back to us second-hand? How can this be?” he asked the crowd, and then added after a pause, “What if instead *we* grow cotton, *we* manufacture clothes, *we* wear them, and then *we* send the second-hand clothes to Europe?” The crowd laughed, cheered, and clapped as Magufuli outlined his vision for development.

Through these and other repeating themes in his speeches, Magufuli portrayed himself as a champion for Tanzanian interests in a world that continues to look down on the country and calls it poor. One of my interlocutors, who also lives in Morogoro, sings Magufuli’s praises in this way. “Before Magu, if you go to a government office, no one respects you and you wait for a long time in line unless you have money or if you know someone. Today, I go to get my [organisation’s] license and I am treated like every other Tanzanian,” he said, highlighting the president’s efforts to reduce corruption, favouritism, and embezzlement among civil servants. Neighbours and young entrepreneurs with whom I chat told me that they welcomed Magufuli’s plan to transform Tanzania into an industrialised, middle-income country, which would solve the unemployment challenges that many young people in the country face.

> *What if instead we grow cotton, we manufacture clothes, we wear them, and then we send the second-hand clothes to Europe?*

In the last five years, as part of this industrialisation plan, Tanzania has embarked on a dizzying array of infrastructural projects. In under three years, I travelled through a new airport terminal, rode over several new bridges and road expansions, and saw the construction of a four hundred-kilometre high-speed railway.

But all of Magufuli’s accomplishments are overshadowed by an increasing authoritarianism. Under new media and information laws, radio stations and

newspapers were disbanded or suspended for alleged false reporting, as determined by a governmental agency. Opposition leaders, journalists, and political activists often face physical violence, death threats, kidnapping, and imprisonment. Indeed, Tundu Lissu, the leading opposition presidential candidate was shot 38 times in an assassination attempt in 2017, the week I arrived in Tanzania. Attendees at several of Lissu's political rallies were tear-gassed these past few weeks. On the eve of the elections with many Zanzibaris already casting their vote, Tanzanians are experiencing widespread disruption to social media and online communication platforms. Since this morning, I have not been able to reach people in Tanzania.

Over the years, I noticed that people have gradually become less willing to talk openly about politics. In 2016 and 2017, I remember listening to political debates and jokes over morning tea about leaders in government, including President Magufuli. Friends and co-workers argued whether he was just a fierce (mkali) leader or a cruel (mkatili) one. In 2018, when the news about attacks and arrests of Magufuli's critics began to circulate, these conversations became more discreet and altogether disappeared. Those who shared their reservations questioned how much Magufuli's personality dominated his politics. My neighbour, a school teacher, questioned the amount of money the government spent purchasing eleven new planes for the country's revived national flag carrier, Air Tanzania. "Could this money be spent to better equip schools?" he asked, noting that none of his students have access to lab equipment for their science practical. Another friend, who works in a private bank, worried whether Magufuli's rhetoric against "imperialist" foreigners might feed the fires of xenophobia.

Much of the international press and organisations like Amnesty International have focused on the government's repression of freedoms, including those of expression and peaceful assembly. The question animating many foreign observers is whether Tanzania's elections would be free and fair. To be clear, any violence against political opposition, activists, voters, and journalists are wrong. But the focus on the freedom and fairness of Wednesday's elections portrays a

limited view of politics in Tanzania. It dismisses the anti-imperialist talk as mere rhetoric.

> *Tanzania's elections present an instance of "decolonising" as an ethnographic category by itself*

At a time when anthropology is reckoning with its racist and colonial past, and when "decolonising" as a method and reflexive mode become integral to anthropological scholarship, Tanzania's elections present an instance of "decolonising" as an ethnographic category by itself. Through condemnations, denials, and accusations of *ubeberu*, or imperialism, Tanzanian politics become a crucial site for figuring out what decolonisation might mean and what implications it might entail in terms of policies and practice for the economy, trade, natural resources extraction, and foreign relations.

In a retort to Magufuli's accusation that he is an imperialist stooge, Tundu Lissu, the frontrunning opposition candidate for the republic's presidency, denied being an imperialist and questioned the crowd at one of his campaign rallies, "*Who* is the real imperialist?"

> *Debates about decolonisation in Tanzania grapple with the practical realities of challenging a global economy that still clings on to colonialist distributions of wealth and power*

"Is it the USA? It is the US after all that trained and paid for the training for our police," he said, making a reference to the unfair way that the police have treated Lissu and his supporters. "Do we have the courage," he went on, "to call these same countries 'imperialist' when we ask them for aid? Do we label those who sign mining contracts or those who own mines 'imperialists'?"

Such debates about decolonisation in Tanzania grapple with the practical realities of challenging a global economy that still clings on to colonialist distributions of wealth and power. To attend to such debates goes beyond what Ryan Jobson

(2020) calls the "decolonial fix." Rather than focusing on inclusion and redistribution, Tanzanian anti-imperialist practice aims to change how the world is currently structured, with foreign mining companies accumulating wealth in the former and emerging metropoles of empire.

These debates suggest that anthropologists, much more than insisting on decolonising research, might also ethnographically treat "decolonisation" as a social and political practice for wielding and contesting power. What does it mean for postcolonial, multiethnic countries like Tanzania to decolonise in today's world? What kinds of solidarities does it imply and require? How are understandings of race, gender, sexuality, and class being challenged through decolonial politics? Which global, economic, political, and state structures need to be dismantled to forge anti-imperialist development?

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As Juno Parreñas and others (Parreñas 2020; Al-Bulushi, Ghosh, and Tahir 2020) recently cautioned, applying decolonial writing beyond North America may itself be culturally imperialist. They question whether decolonial debates in Euro-America can faithfully attend to the political economies of places like Tanzania. It is in fact more insightful and important, I think, that anthropologists pay attention to how decoloniality is being envisioned, enacted, and reimagined in postcolonial places. Such attention will be crucial, too, if anthropology is to be critical of autochthonous claims that fuel the dangerous politics of ethnonationalism (see also Nyamnjoh 2016).

On 28th October, it is unlikely that we would know who the real imperialists are but at least we will know if Magufuli's version of decolonial politics will last five more years.

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The Montanelli Case: Sexuality, Race, and Colonial Forgetting in

BLM Italy.

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Indro Montanelli (1909-2001), the most famous journalist in Italian history, is an intellectual figure whose memory commands respect across Italy's political spectrum. But, following the global protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd in the United States, various associations (community-based, anti-racist, feminist, or student-run) as well as individual citizens demanded that Montanelli's statue should be removed from its eponymous park in Milan and that the park should be renamed. The statue was defaced, splashed with red paint, and protestors scrawled epithets such as "racist" and "rapist" on its base.

In the 1930s, at age twenty-five, Montanelli travelled to Eritrea, where he joined the fascist army as a volunteer. There, he purchased a colonial bride who, in different accounts, he calls either Desta or Fatima, and was either twelve or fourteen years old at the time. Little is known about Desta or Fatima other than what Montanelli stated in later reminiscences. Montanelli's Eritrean sojourn, about which he waxed nostalgically in numerous interviews, contributed to turn him away from his prior enthusiastic support of Mussolini's plans to extend "civilization" into the dark interior of the African continent. By the war's end, Montanelli was transformed into an avowed anti-fascist. Nevertheless, his sexual relations with this African girl, and his patent lack of remorse about it, could not fail to provoke public outrage at a moment when global calls to write counter-histories of imperial and racial violence are growing louder by the day.

In the 1930s, at age twenty-five, Montanelli travelled to Eritrea, where he joined the fascist army as a volunteer.

Some Italian journalists and historians have stepped in to defend the historical memory of Montanelli and to oppose the demolition of the monument. Specifically, his defenders have minimized the severity of Montanelli's past actions, either by deploying a simplistic historical and cultural relativism or by dismissing criticisms of him as naïve attempts to "moralize" history.

Rather than focusing on the material fate of monuments (as others like Igiaba Scego have already productively done), we wish instead to highlight how Montanelli's recollections of his colonial "adventures", as well as the contemporary defense of his memory and character, reveal a critical failure of important segments of the Italian intellectual milieu to comprehend the nature and scale of racial violence.

One of Montanelli's more detailed narrations of his relationship with possibly twelve-year-old Desta can be found in a 1969 interview on Italian television. The

recent resurfacing of this visual document on social media has amplified existing controversies around Montanelli's memory and Italy's colonial past. What distinguishes this video from similar documents is the critical intervention – unusual for that period – of an Eritrean-Italian feminist, Elvira Banotti (1933-2014), who had been a member of the audience (see Dempsey 2018).

In the clip, Montanelli recounts how he married Desta, having bought her from her father according to local customs. Banotti interjects to point out the journalist's inability to comprehend the violence intrinsic to this relationship. Montanelli reassures Banotti that no coercion was involved and clarifies that, in that socio-historical context, it was normal for girls of that age to marry. Banotti presses him, asking first if analogous conduct in Italy would not be considered rape and then, second, what biological and psychological distinctions exist between a twelve-year-old African girl and her European counterparts. Montanelli repeats that local girls married early, but Banotti doesn't relent: "Yours was truly the violent relationship of the colonialist who arrived there and took possession of a twelve-year-old girl." Montanelli either does not understand or, more likely, pretends not to understand what seems to us the most significant aspect of this line of critique: that violence should be considered constitutive of relationships firmly situated within colonial and racial hierarchies.

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Montanelli's legitimation of his sexual relations with a twelve-year-old girl, in this video and in other interviews and writings, is realized through specific discursive practices whose common denominator is the dehumanization of the colonial subject. Desta is reduced to a commodity: she is bought from her father and, when the young Montanelli returns to Italy, she is handed over to another soldier. In the journalist's description, Desta's feelings, needs, and voice are obliterated. Her personhood is represented in purely instrumental terms: she washes

Montanelli's clothes and provides indispensable sexual services. Moreover, in discussing their conjugal life, Montanelli doesn't spare his audience indecent details: he alludes to the fact that the girl was infibulated; he mentions the virile effort he had to apply to overcome this obstacle; and he explains that it was ultimately thanks to the "brutal intervention of her mother" that he managed to have sexual intercourse with Desta. He tells us, though, that she never felt any pleasure because of the multiple surgeries performed on her body. Finally, Desta is placed in marked continuity with the sphere of nature: Montanelli describes her as a "docile little animal," adding that it took him some time to become accustomed to her goat-like smell.

Far from being a prerogative of Montanelli or his generation, justifications for Italian male sexual proclivities in the colonies still abound in contemporary journalistic debates. Marco Travaglio, a well-known journalist, considered Montanelli's heir and pupil, defended his mentor by adopting the same simplistic relativism that Montanelli had displayed earlier. According to Travaglio, Montanelli was a man of his time; he was no saint, but certainly he wasn't a racist, much less a rapist.

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To corroborate his claim, Travaglio cites a recent interview with Angelo Del Boca, a well-regarded historian who documented the atrocities committed by the Italian army in the colonies, and whose popular writings have greatly contributed to demystifying the national myth of the *Italiani brava gente* (Italians, good people; Del Boca 2012). In this interview, Del Boca rejects the notion that Montanelli was a racist, suggesting that being in a relationship with such a young girl was not only "normal" at that time, but that inter-racial unions amounted to a form of "fraternization" between Italians and indigenous populations. For Del Boca, racist people would never marry African women; indeed, with the advent of Fascism,

“true” racists would prohibit all relations between Italian men and local women to preserve the purity of the Italian race.

Interpreting Montanelli’s behaviors as part of a grand project of integration predicated on politics of intimacy, however, makes sense only within a strictly legalistic view of state and racial violence. For Del Boca, such violence manifests itself exclusively within the frame of military aggression against African sovereign states and the violation of international treaties, such as the Geneva Convention. Within this hermeneutic scheme, there is no space for the identification of the most intimate and pedestrian forms that racial violence takes in domestic spaces – spaces that are commonly, but erroneously, conceived of as extraneous to the logics of the state.

For Del Boca, there’s clearly a “before” – when interracial unions promoted integration – and an “after” – when their prohibition marked an unequivocal transition to institu-tionalized racism. However, a quick sketch of the history of interracial unions (known as *madamato* or *concubinaggio*) complicates this neat chronology and reveals historical continuities in racial ideologies and practices between the various phases of Italian colonialism (see Barrera 1996). Such a historical examination exposes crucial connections between the state, kinship, and racial ideologies – connections that are absent or marginal in the debate around Montanelli and in mainstream discussions of Italian racism.

In the first phases of Italian colonialism (1890-1922), liberal governments tolerated more or less formalized interracial unions, which entailed limited rights for local women and their progeny alike. Yet, the same governments demonstrated a less encouraging attitude towards civic marriage proper which would grant much greater rights to native wives and their children. Liberal policies around interracial unions took shape in a context in which Italian women – whose presence was especially limited in the first phases of colonialism – could

not satisfy neither the sexual needs of the colonists nor their pressing demand for domestic labor (Stefani 2007). Moreover, at a more practical level, the state encouraged monogamous forms of concubinaggio in order to prevent epidemics of venereal diseases that presented a serious danger for Italian men. Instead of being instrumental to a grand project of enlightened *métissage* evoked by Del Boca's use of "fraternization" earlier, the relational practices that we describe stemmed from markedly pragmatic needs in a context of violent racial subjugation (see Trento 2011).

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Although the racial ideologies of these years were less rigid than those devised during fascism, they nevertheless betrayed an affective racial grammar in which Black women of the Horn were seen as suitable for short, instrumentalist, sexual and domestic relationships, but unsuited to civic marriage and the privileges entailed. While some Italian scholars of the time, including anthropologists, theorized that the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa were closer to Mediterranean populations than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, colonial subjects continued to be considered decidedly inferior to the colonizers (see Trento 2012). Hence, the institution of *concubinaggio*, differently from what Del Boca seems to imply, was based on a conception of African women as racial and sexual subordinates, unhappy surrogates for the ostensibly superior, yet unavailable, white Italian women (Barrera 1996).

With significant changes in racial ideologies ushered in by fascism, the policies regulating *concubinaggio* underwent dramatic restructuring. The fascist government – partly to justify its invasion of Ethiopia – redefined the people of the Horn as bearers of an absolute and incommensurable alterity. Consequentially, the racial laws of 1937 forbade sexual relations between different races (Barrera 2003). While it remained difficult to enforce this ban, the following year a new law was promulgated, prohibiting interracial marriages. In 1940, the racial laws were

expanded to deprive mixed-race children of the possibility of acquiring Italian citizenship, stripping them of the partial and provisional rights that existed during the liberal period of Italian colonial rule (Sorgoni 2002).

> *At the structural level, racial laws and policies of all phases of colonialism institutionalized the subordination of colonized women.*

Today, similar legal anxieties permeate the sclerotic debates about the acquisition of citizenship for the children of non-European nationals born on Italian soil (*jus soli*), even though the public discourse on contemporary Italian racism tends to ignore its genealogical continuities with racial ideologies of the colonial era (see Pesarini 2017).

There were, of course, interracial unions based on reciprocal affection. Nevertheless, at the structural level, racial laws and policies of all phases of colonialism institutionalized the subordination of colonized women – women who, depending on the historical period in question, could be bought and sold, handed over, and used, but who could rarely ask for justice and redress for abuses and sexual crimes which were systemic in scope. Montanelli's reasoning is undergirded by the same forms of objectification institutionalized by the spirit of colonial law: to render colonized women subject to power, as things to be consumed.

In the interviews and texts we examined, we could not detect signs of remorse from Montanelli or any suggestion that his relationship with Desta was based on reciprocal affection. Yet, we conclude this essay by widening our considerations about colonial and racial violence beyond debates that center individual sentiments and attitudes in assessing intents as the main drivers for racism. This focus on the individual locates racism within the psyche, or in unconscious biases, rather than in institutionalized practices and relations that instantiate and maintain color-coded hierarchies. By focusing exclusively on the persona of

Montanelli, most of the recent debates obscure the more significant fact that many Italians haven't yet begun to come to terms with the racist legacy of their country, nor with the reflexes and sediments of the recent colonial past that continue to mark the present. Consider, for instance, the fate of children born in interracial relationships in the colonies (see Pesarini 2014). Many were abandoned in orphanages, with no access to rights under Italian law. Those who continued to live with their mothers were denied the legal recognition that Italian citizenship laws should confer on the basis of *jus sanguinis*. To fully benefit from the rights guaranteed by descent, the few children who were formally recognized by their fathers had, in many cases, to migrate, disavow their roots, and break ties with their African mothers.

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To equate ethics with legality, as some of Montanelli's defenders do, reveals an incapacity to comprehend the multifarious shapes of racial violence in colonial contexts. An ethic that ignores the responsibility of Italian men and silences the voices of colonized women is a cover for an abuse of power that effectively prevents organic reflections on racism and anti-racism from becoming part of a common national consciousness.

Elvira Banotti, who gave voice to Desta in questioning Montanelli's narrative, was herself the product of one of the interracial unions we've described. Banotti asks simple but crucial questions, obliging us to consider that, with the approval of law, state and society, Montanelli bought and had sex with a twelve-year-old girl – actions that, if performed on Italian soil, would have been sanctioned with great severity even by the moral code of that time. For Banotti, the fact that Montanelli could recount those actions publicly, with an air of impunity, and without any sense of remorse is explicable only by the fact of Desta's blackness and her condition of colonial subjugation.

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Featured Image: Monument to Indro Montanelli, Milan. Photo (cropped and b&w) by Zibione, found on Wikimedia commons (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Tasting Qualities

Ishita Dey
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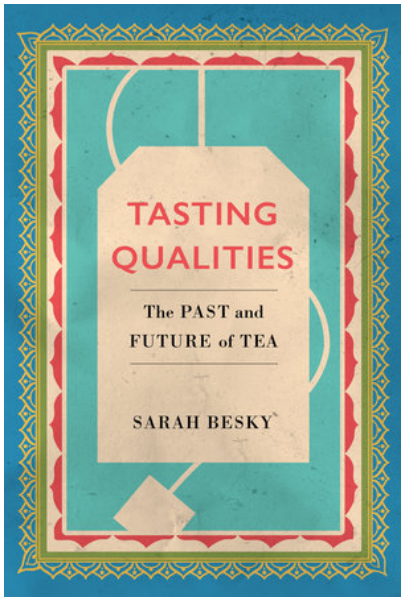
How does one reproduce the taste, smell and appearance of any craft based/ industrially produced food commodity? Tea is one of the many beverages with roots in colonialism. In the recent decade anthropological scholarship on tea has mainly revolved around the plantation economy, the ecology of tea production and consumption, and the gendered nature of plantation work. Pia Chatterjee's (2001) monumental work *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* traced the political economy and ecology of gendered representation of cultures around tea. Supurna Banerjee (2017) in her work *Activism and Agency in India: Nurturing Resistance in the Tea Plantations* makes a methodological shift in understanding tea plantations as social spaces, rather than economic units of production and thereby exploring the question of agency in the resistance that wrecked the tea plantations from 2000-2010. Both these works are significant to understand the post coloniality of the tea plantation

economy. Despite closure of tea gardens in Darjeeling, labour struggles, reported cases of starvation deaths in tea gardens in the Himalayan foothills, the popularity of tea in India has not subsided. Tea continues to be brewed and mixed with flavouring agents to be consumed across the globe irrespective of whether or not tea leaves are locally sourced. Like coffee, tea is cultivated in select geographies, but it is brewed and consumed as a hot and cold beverage across the World.

What do people reach out for when they reach out for a cup of tea/ coffee or a plate of food? Despite unequal relations along the commodity chain of most plantation based food commodities such as tea, coffee and sugar, what goes into making a cup of nice tea? Sarah Besky's recently published work *Tasting Qualities. The Past and Future of Tea* is a timely addition to the literature that explores how the plantation economy thrives on an unequal relationship between the labourers, plantation managers, plantation owners, traders and finally how this commodity chain translates into the making of a 'quality' tea.



This brilliant ethnography is based on a decade long research in the auction houses of Kolkata, among tea brokers and tea traders across time frames, in the tea plantations of Dooars across colonial and post-colonial times to study what goes on into the making of a 'quality' tea. Sarah Besky argues that a study on quality has to be qualitative, whereas 'in contemporary capitalism the relationship between quality and market is often reduced to numbers' (pp 2). In her work she moves away from this reading and proposes to understand the production of quality by not only focusing on consumers' preferences but also by tracing the "spatial arrangements of relationships that draw humans, things, words and nonhumans into patterned conjunctures" – an idea she borrows from Michelle Murphy's work on chemical infrastructures. Michelle Murphy builds upon the work of Susan Leigh Star, the Science studies scholar who revisited 'the

idea of infrastructure not as a thing but as a multidimensional set of relational properties that become an ecology of infrastructure'. Murphy feels that this makes infrastructures recursive, temporal, and 'built ecologies' (Murphy 2013 : 104). Pinning down what makes infrastructure is not an easy task. One possible way Murphy suggests is to understand the entanglements as a 'built ecology' (ibid : 104) because 'no one actor – no one form of expertise – maintains the system' (Besky 2020: 14). Hence Besky proposes to take us on an ethnographic journey through the process of 'quality' making.

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Besky's work provides a welcome departure from the existing scholarship on the anthropology of capitalism which consists in 'following a thing'. Such an approach has allowed anthropologists to understand the shifts of meanings in the life of a thing. For example, Paige West (2012) demonstrates that coffee beans originating from Papua New Guinea might find a new meaning in the hands of the 'male' traders in Hamburg whose work consists in creating 'commensurable coffees'. The act of distinguishing 'coffee from the pool of commensurable coffees' is not so simple. The traders must have the knowledge to 'interchange' coffee from 'other origins' in case coffee from Papua New Guinea is in short supply, West observes (ibid : 204).

Sarah Besky, on the other hand, does not privilege any actor, or a certain time frame as the beginning or endpoint of quality. Instead she shows the temporal nature of quality as she takes us through colonial experiments to brew the perfect cup of tea, to tea tasting (Chapter 1), auction houses (Chapter 2) run and managed mostly by men belonging to the Indian middle class. Besky observes post plantation labour spaces were mostly controlled and managed by Indian middle-class men – be it the act of testing the tea, or the management of the

auction. The entry of women as tea tasters and in the management of auction is of recent origins. In other words, 'whose bodies can count as properly qualified to evaluate tea is a highly gendered one'(pp16). If tea tasting is an act of discerning quality through sensory properties around tea leaves, the discussion on Chapter 2 revolves around the 'tea auction catalogue', – a 'communicative infrastructure' through which words, numbers and narratives find meaning in producing 'quality' tea. Both Chapter 1 (on the taste of tea), and Chapter 2 (on auction) allow us a glimpse into the ways in which human bodies encounter tea leaves, and how tea leaves become things to be numbered in the auction catalogue – a fixed capital that becomes the reference point for communication between plantation fields to tasting rooms to buyers across geographies.

Black tea is a 'blend' of different origins and tastes of tea, and it has nothing to do with origin. Creating a blend often involves mixing twenty or thirty varieties of tea. Such procedures are called invoices. Starting from small to large companies they depend on a host of actors to buy their invoices so that a cup of Tetley across geographies irrespective of 'quality' of water would taste the same. However the history of blending (as discussed in Chapter 3) is a murky tale of a failed attempt to trademark 'Empire tea'. While the tea industry struggled with the concerns around tannin, and its associated health hazards there was a noticeable shift in the semantics of 'quality' tea. The answer was the biology of the tea plant, plantation tea and a celebration of indentured labour in the colonies. The image of plucking of two leaves and a bud in the hands of Nepali, Adivasi, or Tamil Women depending on the geography came to represent 'quality' tea. This chapter documents the history of the science behind the production of quality of tea and the struggles to establish 'plantation tea' as 'quality' tea compared to the varied nature of tea production sites in China. To understand how and why 'plantation tea' became famous, Besky does not only establish the plantation as an important infrastructure for the plucking and sourcing of tea but also demonstrates how the plantation functioned as an 'experimental system.'

> *The image of plucking of two leaves and a bud in the hands of Nepali, Adivasi, or Tamil Women depending on the geography came to represent 'quality' tea.*

The term ‘experimental system’ was conceptualised by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, a historian of science who conceived science as a process and experimentations as ‘generators of knowledge’. Besky, in the introduction cautions us that the term experimental is to be read as an analytical framework. “I use “experimental” as an analytical term, then, but I also use it because, at various points in tea’s history, people inside India’s tea industry have explicitly described their work with tea as experimental” (2020 : 15)

‘Quality’ tea is a process of experimental systems at loggerheads with each other. In Chapter 4 – the Science of Quality – Besky gives us an insight into how the chemistry of tea had to be integrated within plantation production. The Tocklai Tea Research Institute established in 1911, in Jorhat, Assam is a key actor in the discursive framing of ‘quality’ as ‘a science’. I want to draw attention to one of the many experiments developed within Tocklai laboratory which opens the question of how ‘the science of quality’ tea had to be merged with ‘economic’ interests of ‘quality’ tea controlled by brokers, traders and others. By the mid-1950s Tocklai laboratory had developed experimental varieties of tea with theaavin and thearubigin values. They were unsure if they could rely on the opinions of brokers because a broker would rely on how blenders and dealers would receive the tea. To ascertain the value, Tocklai laboratory hired their own in-house tasters who were encouraged to visit brokers in Kolkata.

> *The production of ‘quality’ tea was inherently experimental, built on ‘experimental systems’ of colonial empire, postcolonial science, plantation labour hierarchy and most importantly a certain colonial baggage of monoculture that is evident even in today’s plantation arrangements.*

Despite its important theaavin and thearubigin values, the tea could not fetch a price because of its appearance. Another sample received a better pricing because of its golden tip. Tocklai laboratory was an important part of the colonial apparatus and its journey to scientific sovereignty provides an important backdrop to understand the postcolonial science of ‘quality’ tea. The production of

‘quality’ tea was inherently experimental, built on ‘experimental systems’ of colonial empire, postcolonial science, plantation labour hierarchy and most importantly a certain colonial baggage of monoculture that is evident even in today’s plantation arrangements. Industry insiders believed that ‘quality’ tea could only come from plantations with histories of monoculture. With the closure of plantations, small growers following the Bought-Leaf Tea Factory model (where the processing tea leaves come from gardens not owned by the factory) in Dooars, have started to emerge. One of Besky’s respondents, a journalist reporting on the closure of tea gardens, feels that small growers who supply to Bought Leaf Tea Factories are working with young vibrant bushes and therefore he insists, ‘the quality is really good’. This last remark illustrates how quality tea is shaped by the experimental systems of several ‘doers’ such as tasters, brokers, plantation owners, plantation labourers, chemists, biologist etc. A study on ‘quality’ is built into the ecology of ‘experimental systems’.

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Read Tanya Matthan's review here.

Read Sabine Parrish's review here.

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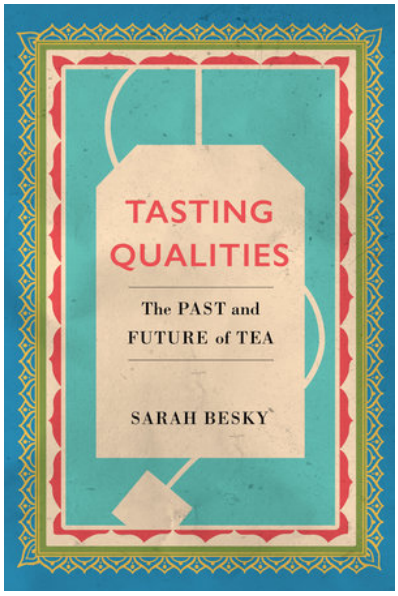
Tasting Qualities

Tanya Matthan
October, 2020

Sarah Besky’s ethnographically and historically rich study of the Indian tea industry begins with a deceptively simple question: what makes a good cup of tea? The answer, it turns out, takes us to nineteenth-century British planters and chemists and to twenty-first century Indian bureaucrats and brokers – and most significantly, to the enduring connections between them in pursuit of quality tea. It is this quest for quality that animates Besky’s archival and ethnographic interlocutors – and this book which traces the work of producing quality across factories, plantations, auction houses, tasting rooms, and scientific laboratories. Quality is a subjective concept, one that is difficult to pin down. And yet, quality has been objectified and standardized since the very inception of tea cultivation in Britain’s South Asian colonies.



This concern with quality is therefore hardly new – rather, its roots can be traced to British imperial political economy and science.

The force of the book's argument lies in its deft exploration of how notions of quality are steeped in racialized colonial valuations of people, places, and plants. Besky situates questions of food chemistry, labor recruitment, market-making, blending and auctioning squarely within projects of empire and development. To this day, the industry is infused with imperial nostalgia, the violent legacies of the plantation form, and the extractive monoculture of tea itself.

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Besky's investigation into quality departs from traditional commodity chain analyses in two distinct ways. First, while much work has studied the two ends of the chain – production or consumption – this book dwells on the "spaces in between: those of brokerage, blending, auctioning, and food chemistry" (p. 2). Second, and more significantly, while focus has largely been on fair-trade and artisanal commodities, this book examines the complex work that goes into making standardized mass-market black tea. Here, quality refers not to distinction or singularity but rather to reliability and sameness. Quality, Besky argues, is most politically and theoretically significant when invoked in the

service of reliable and normalizing sensorial experiences (p. 179). Most fascinatingly, Besky shows that it is the variability of tea as a crop that enables its reproducibility in the cup – it tastes the same *because* what it contains is so different. Counterintuitively, then, these ideas, valuations, and sensoria of quality are produced through experimentation rather than mere replication. Difference and variation are elicited and managed in order to (re)produce coherence.

> *While focus has largely been on fair-trade and artisanal commodities, this book examines the complex work that goes into making standardized mass-market black tea.*

In examining this question, Besky follows the work of anthropologists of capitalism who ponder how it is that commodities are made standard and uniform across the specificity and variability of spaces of production. As Anna Tsing writes, despite each link in the commodity chain being an arena of cultural production, the commodity "must emerge as if untouched by this friction" (Tsing 2005: 51). In the case of tea, the question might be altered to ask how it is that tea – despite the variability of soils and temperatures at the point of production and of water, milk and sugar at the site of consumption – emerges as a familiar and reliable cup?

Besky shows us that this is an enormous and complex project – undertaken not just by plantation laborers, but also by brokers and blenders, agricultural scientists and economic consultants, chemists and auctioneers, among others. But the flavors and textures that make tea a global kitchen staple – *bright, dull, stewy, dark, light, brisk, floral* – are made possible by the colonial plantation system within which most Indian tea is still produced. The most compelling parts of the book are those in which Besky reminds us that the (re)production of quality reproduces this agro-industrial ecology built on labor extraction and racialized violence.

> *After all, the plantation is an ecology that contains and constrains the botanical variability of the tea bush into a standardized form.*

After all, the plantation is an ecology “that contains and constrains the botanical variability of the tea bush into a standardized form” (p. 6). However, “resources – even monocultured ones – do not “stand alone” as much as they are held in place” (p. 133). The plantation endures because it is maintained. But this maintenance entails both caring and killing. It is generative not only of the material and sensory qualities that make for “good tea” but also of infrastructures of housing and welfare that produce affective entanglements which, in turn, make it a space of home and belonging for laborers and their families. It is these aspirations to quality – of tea and of life – that “keep the monoculture together” (p. 151).

Even beyond the space of the plantation, the very language of quality – its “communicative infrastructures” (p. 54) – are hegemonic ruins of empire. For instance, Besky powerfully shows how ‘teawords’ – the expert lexicon of brokers to describe and assess tea – signify the embodied experiences of white male brokers as aesthetic experts. Not only does this language echo colonial valuations, it reverberates onto sites of production, where the work of women pluckers – using their trained fingers – is evaluated and managed based on these assessments of the taste, smell, and texture of tea. These words, therefore, materially and semiotically connect the (unequal) embodied labor performed by ‘expert’ men and laboring women.

Take the crucial task of blending teas. Besky’s extensive archival research reveals that blending was as much about creating the perfect cup as it was about obscuring ecological difference across the empire. Blending not only eased racial anxieties about safety, health and hygiene within an industrialized and ethnically diverse supply chain, but also made tea uniquely British in its taste. This culminated in nineteenth-century British attempts to mobilize nationalist and racialized sentiments to (unsubtly) label certain teas as ‘Empire Tea’ to be distinguished from both Dutch colonial tea and Chinese green tea. Through this, Besky draws our attention to the intertwined embodiments produced by contact with tea which connects “white metropolitan bodies and the bodies of racially marked field laborers” (p.76).

> *From these imperial ruins of failing and abandoned plantations emerge not feral ecologies, but a continued expansion of risky monocultures. The logics and structures of the plantation persist even beyond the space of the plantation itself.*

Post-liberalization economic reforms in India now aim to challenge these colonial legacies. Yet, this attempt to overcome problems ailing the current system of production is – paradoxically – done through the extension of the tea monoculture beyond the plantation, thus further displacing other crops and ways of life. From these imperial ruins of failing and abandoned plantations emerge not feral ecologies, but a continued expansion of risky monocultures. The logics and structures of the plantation persist even beyond the space of the plantation itself.

This book is a wonderfully layered and immaculately researched exploration of the enduring tastes of empire. As an insightful follow-up to Besky's first book on meanings of justice on Darjeeling fair-trade tea plantations, this work reminds us of the enduring legacies of plantation worlds, and presents a necessary reckoning with this past in order to reconfigure ideas of what that afternoon cup could and should taste, look, and feel like in the future.

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Read Sabine Parrish's review here.

Read Ishita Dey's review here.

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Tasting Qualities

Sabine Parrish
October, 2020

As I write this, in the uncertain and tumultuous times of early June 2020, there is a storm brewing in the world of British tea drinkers.

On June 6th, a Twitter user posted "I'm dead chuffed that Yorkshire Tea hasn't supported BLM". The next day, Yorkshire Tea's account replied with the following:

"Please don't buy our tea again. We're taking some time to educate ourselves and plan proper action before we post. We stand against racism. #BlackLivesMatter". A flurry of social media posting began to unfold in response, with user @PamelaWA lamenting, "So now I've got to buy PGTips?? Well f* me. This sucks. And Yorkshire Tea is done. Good luck with the bs stance." PGTips, for their part, shot back: "Yeah it does suck, Pamela. If you are boycotting teas that stand against racism, you're going to have to find two new tea brands now. blacklivesmatter #solidaritea"

> *'Please don't buy our tea again.' Other major UK tea brands such as Teapigs, Tetley, and Twinings all swiftly joined the online #solidaritea conversation.*

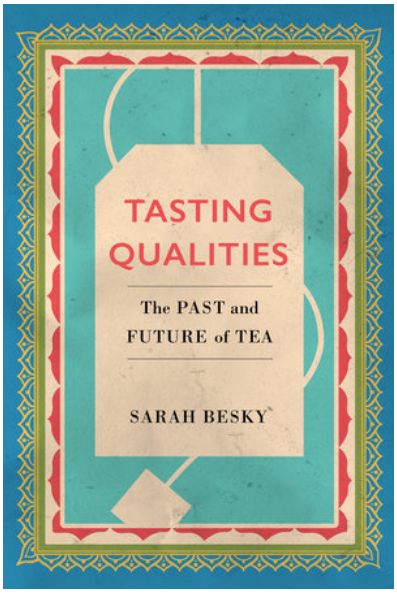
Other major UK tea brands such as Teapigs, Tetley, and Twinings all swiftly joined the online #solidaritea conversation. The invocation of #solidaritea and public proclamations of good corporate citizenship on behalf of these tea companies, however, stand on shaky grounds—grounds of colonial and imperial exploitation, labour abuses (both gendered and racialised), and long-term environmental impact.

These themes have been deftly explored by Sarah Besky throughout her corpus of work on tea in India, and have crystallised in her most recent book, *Tasting Qualities: The Past and Future of Tea.* Watching the rise of #solidaritea unfold online in the days after I finished reading the book, I found myself particularly grateful for Besky's historically-grounded approach. In placing sensory ethnographyand political economy in dialogue with temporal shifts, archival research, and historical methodologies, Besky shows the ever-changing uses and definitions of quality within the tea industry. In this way, we can begin to understand the moral claims at play in the #solidaritea discussions as part of a larger project of constructing and selling quality.

Besky opens the book by asking, "What makes a good cup of tea?" (p.1). As we come to see, quality is constructed both materially and chemically and in relation with the body and environment, but also in relation to valuation processes, state

intervention, and consumer-end marketing discourses. Reading Besky in the context of #solidaritea, then, gives us a concrete consumer-end example of how moral positioning intersects with and helps constitute ideas of quality, while also illuminating the possible tensions and contradictions between two primary forms of quality: 'the quality of things produced for the market and the quality of life for the people who produce and consume those things' (p. 130).

Reading Besky in the context of #solidaritea, then, gives us a concrete consumer-end example of how moral positioning intersects with and helps constitute ideas of quality, while also illuminating the possible tensions and contradictions between two primary forms of quality: 'the quality of things produced for the market and the quality of life for the people who produce and consume those things.



Tasting Qualities links these two strands of quality through the material and chemical composition of the tea itself. This has been a relatively under-explored and under-theorised area of sensory ethnography: The book's focus on'cheap tea'—which is grown and blended for standardised tasting experience—over high-end, specialty, single-estate tea—which is prized for its unique and identifiable tastes—provides the ideal platform for examining how social tastes and norms mix

with physical properties and chemical compounds to create holistic ideas of quality. If every bag of ‘cheap tea’ needs to taste the same, provide the same sensory experience, and be enjoyable, then a major technical and social operation must ensure this is the case. As the later chapters of the book show, the quality standards needed to maintain consistent flavour in blends can partly explain the persistence of the monoculture plantation system in India, despite reform efforts from both the state and external development NGOs. Even when plantations are broken up, smallholders in areas surrounding plantations are still encouraged to grow tea. And while production methods are, in some locations, evolving along new and more collaborative models, the primacy of monoculture has yet to be substantively changed. In this way the seemingly abstract notion of ‘quality’ begins to map itself onto the landscape and environment, imperial histories and contemporary mainstream economic logic, the bodies and lives of workers (agricultural and otherwise), and—through blends and physical consumption—the end consumer.

The most evocative ethnographic passages in the book come early on as Besky places us with professional tea tasters and brokers who begin the formalised process of qualification—setting prices, selling at auctions, and diverting teas into lots for blending. Later, we revisit the auction house for the launch of digital auctions, and the sense of loss felt by brokers is plain. The shift away from the outcry auction format—one which was intensely social and requiring the in-person presence of representatives from tea-trading firms—as well as the shift in valuation engendered by the digital medium (which requires an *a priori* assessment of a tea’s monetary value, instead of a negotiation of it during the act of outcry auction), ultimately placed tea more squarely within contemporary financial capitalism. I was struck by some of the oft-overlooked phantoms of commodity chain studies: the middlemen and brokers, who though adjusting over time to the new format, lost something of fulfilment, and of personal quality of life and connection to their work. As Besky writes, the shift to ‘…digital trading was a perceived violation of an aesthetic and ethical connection between a style of trading, a style of production, and a style of consumption. Unlike commodities

traders in Chicago or London, who have little material connection to the products they buy and sell, tea brokers knew tea—and tea plantations—on intimate terms' (p. 168).

> *Given the British interest in a good cuppa was created by the colonial project and through exploited bodies, labour, and environments through British colonial history until present day, questions of corporate responsibility and response to solidarity and justice movements like Black Lives Matter must necessarily be looked at within an expansive network of history and practice.*

This last reflection brings us back to #solidaritea. Given the British interest in a good cuppa was created by the colonial project and through exploited bodies, labour, and environments through British colonial history until present day, questions of corporate responsibility and response to solidarity and justice movements like Black Lives Matter must necessarily be looked at within an expansive network of history and practice. For those Twitter commenters who were aghast at tea companies' support of Black Lives Matter, the overall perception of the quality of the brands decreased; the inverse was true for those who pledged to stand in #solidaritea with Yorkshire Tea and the others. The tea and its material quality may remain the same in this instance, but quality is also contingent upon both its social and historical situatedness. While the book is subtitled 'the past and future of tea', the overall project it tackles is larger than only tea, pointing the way to the future of wider quality definitions and negotiations. Quality, as both Besky and #solidaritea show us, remains not only in motion but also—despite the prevalence of experts and technoscientific processes throughout the chain of production, despite standardisation and attempts at sameness—open to debate, interpretation, and change.

Read Ishita Dey's review here.

Read Tanya Matthan's review here.

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Atmospheres of change

Siri Schwabe
October, 2020

This month, Chileans will decide whether to set in motion a process to change the country's dictatorship-era constitution while marking a year since the beginning of a popular uprising only temporarily stalled due to Covid-19. In this context, change remains a simultaneously mundane and spectacular phenomenon as it lingers everywhere in the air.

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I kicked off the year 2020 in a small house on the outskirts of Santiago de Chile. There were just five of us there, a small familial gathering plus me, someone who had just come back to visit after a five-year absence. We had pisco drinks and home-made pizzas that we shared standing around the kitchen. We talked about travels and climates and just a little bit about politics. A few days earlier, a friend and I had gifted each other lucky yellow underwear to be worn on this evening to ensure prosperity in the new year. I had left my pair upstairs, both unworn and unwashed since its journey from the factory to the street vendor's stall to my tote bag to my mess of a still half-unpacked suitcase. Other rituals were, however, carried out with care. Following Danish tradition, we jumped into the new year from couches and chairs at the stroke of midnight to avoid slipping into the crack between then and now. Then, we each filled a small backpack with a few randomly selected objects and exchanged cash among us before embarking on a walk around the neighbourhood, pesos in our pockets and some light luggage on our backs. This would, I was told, mean a new year full of monetary gains and adventures in travelling. None of the neighbours who had come out with their kids to play with confetti seemed to find our rather idiosyncratic procession particularly strange. We stopped to chat, the mood was light.

2020 did not turn out quite as we hoped it might. There has been no abundance of money nor travel. It has been difficult to keep the mood light. Pandemic twists and turns aside, this year has seen continued calls for change leading up to Chile's October 25 referendum on constitutional change—originally planned for April—and, somewhat expectedly, an excessive government response in the form of teargas, rubber bullets, and more. In Santiago as much as in the rest of the

country, the new year arrived in the midst of a social uprising. Since October of last year, protesters had made waves far beyond the newly dubbed Plaza de la Dignidad, the epicentre from which demands for a more just society had been extending outwards ever since a rise in Santiago's public transportation fares tipped a cup that had been filling with almost-final drops for some time.

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As has been pointed out by many since then, the changed fare pricing was merely a very small tip on a very large iceberg that had been looming underneath the surface of Chilean society for many years. With a constitution formulated during military rule still in place, large parts of the Chilean population continue to come up against politically imposed barriers that uphold pervasive socio-economic inequalities. This uprising, then, quickly came to embrace various overlapping causes, concerns, and visions for the future. It also brought out the viciousness of the police force and the authorities overseeing their work.

> *This uprising, then, quickly came to embrace various overlapping causes, concerns, and visions for the future. It also brought out the viciousness of the police force and the authorities overseeing their work.*

In the last year, thousands have been hurt during protests. Before the end of 2019, hundreds of people had suffered horrific and life-changing eye injuries as a result of shotgun pellets fired by the police force, the so-called *carabineros*. In early October this year, as protests were intensifying in the weeks leading up to the referendum, the state-sanctioned violence seemed to reach new heights as a young man was forcefully pushed by a *carabinero* from a bridge into the shallow Mapocho river below, falling head first with hardly any water there to soften the impact. Caught on camera, the officer in question has since been detained on suspicion of attempted murder. However, despite widely shared images evincing otherwise, police authorities have maintained that the 16-year-old simply fell over the side of the railing.

Well before the arrival of Covid-19 brought things to a lull for a time, goggles and face coverings were already a common sight in Santiago, protecting not against viral contagion but against other undesired presences spreading through the air: bullets and teargas.

At the same time, during my visit, the protests and the undercurrent of discord that spurred them on seemed both omnipresent and, at times, distant. Along the streets around the Bellas Artes metro station and down through the adjacent neighbourhood of Lastarria, young people—some alone, some in pairs, and some in small groups—filled the sidewalks with an assortment of little things laid out on blankets for sale. Some were vending old clothes, others new homemade garments that might have made a small but not insignificant profit. Others still sold jewellery, packets of incense, and other diminutive goods alongside more seasoned vendors who offered up used books from stalls that served to lift their business up from the pavement. Right in the heart of the neighbourhood, a photographer was selling homemade prints in varying sizes. His photos all depicted scenes from the protests of recent months, allowing passers-by and potential customers to see with their own eyes the spectacle of events recently transpired, albeit it a one-dimensional spectacle at a relatively comfortable distance from the real deal, still playing out just a few blocks away. No matter where I went, it seemed, there was no escaping reminders of the antagonisms that seep through the post-dictatorial city.

*

A few days into January, I had gone for a drink with some friends. Enjoying the pleasant warmth of the early evening and having decided to stay outdoors, we sat around a wooden table in a popular courtyard-turned-bar, sipping salt-rimmed pints and sharing snacks while surrounded by walls covered in ivy and groups of people talking and laughing at the tables around us. Soon enough, however, another presence made itself known. It started as a slight itch, like a sneeze coming on. Soon it felt more like a peppery irritation of nostrils and eyes. Looking around, I could see people at the other tables beginning to hold their noses or

otherwise cover their faces. Looks were exchanged and a few giggles passed around between the tables.

The timing seemed about right. Somehow the inflow of teargas had been surprising and expected at the same time. It being the early evening, the daily round of protest would be kicking off down the street at Plaza de la Dignidad. It was only logical that teargas cannisters would be flying through the air, their contents blowing with the breeze in our direction. The smell and discomfort of the teargas were visceral reminders of the constant vicinity of (potential) unrest. Their presence in the setting of a cosy patio bar somehow also took the edge off the threat they represented, as if we were all aware that we were protected, at a distance from trouble in our walled enclosure.

> *The smell and discomfort of the teargas were visceral reminders of the constant vicinity of (potential) unrest.*

Most likely, not much would have been happening by way of riots or disturbances of any possible peace down the road at the square. Just an hour or two earlier, I had been passing time in Parque Forestal, a stretch of urban green leading up to Plaza de la Dignidad. I sat on a concrete bench overlooking an impromptu art installation comprised of oversized cut-out cardboard eyes hanging from the trees; a reference to the targeting of eyes by state-authorized shotgun-carriers. Reading and soaking up a bit of afternoon sun while waiting for a friend, I was interrupted by the familiar sight and sound of a water cannon slowly rolling around the block while intermittently blasting water in the direction of anyone around.

The water cannons, known as *guanacos* in local parlance, were no unfamiliar presence. And in some ways, it seemed as if the purpose of this particular *guanaco* lay in its very presence. Had it been deployed simply as a reminder that violence was not only a constant possibility but in fact something quite likely to occur at the hands of authorities? In either case, the *guanaco*'s work seemed largely ineffective, both as a source of liquid assault and as a purveyor of fear.

There were no crowds and nothing even remotely resembling what some might term riotous behaviour. I saw water, but it was flowing down the street, not dripping off protesters. People strolling through the park at a safe distance continued to do just that, the scene failing to raise neither alarm nor eyebrows.

Nonetheless, I felt the urge to warn my friend of the potential danger of passing through Plaza de la Dignidad on his way to meet me. “I see the *guanaco* in the plaza,” I wrote. “Always,” he responded. “Be careful,” I added. “Always,” he responded.

A couple of days later, I was walking past the presidential palace at La Moneda when I came upon the *guanaco* once more. Rather than an ominous presence, this time the water cannon was the unlikely star of an awkward scene. While a few passers-by stopped to point and film, the water cannon was being slowly and painstakingly manoeuvred around a narrow corner. A couple of uniformed *carabineros* assisted from street level with waving hands while the bulky vehicle rolled forward, came to a halt, rolled back, turned a bit, rolled forward, came to a halt. It looked bruised and battered with an air of defeat. The sun was shining, the street was almost quiet. I carried on and ordered lunch at a sidewalk café.

*

Despite viral interruptions, the wheels of change have kept turning since then. Indeed, in this context, the pandemic has only highlighted the very issues protesters set out to call attention to in the first place. Soon after Covid-19 made its way to Santiago, videos showing people crammed together on public transportation on their way to work began circulating. For the working poor, there was no working from home, no avoiding the rush hour commute, even during a pandemic. Unequal access to decent healthcare remains a major grievance and a symptom of a political system many consider sick.

> *Indeed, in this context, the pandemic has only highlighted the very issues protesters set out to call attention to in the first place.*

Meanwhile, as lockdown measures were put in place, President Sebastián Piñera took the opportunity to pose for photos in an empty Plaza de la Dignidad, marking in no subtle way his supposed success in dismantling the movement for change. Of course, although he had declared a state of emergency and claimed to be "at war" already at the outset of demonstrations in October 2019, it was the onslaught of a pandemic rather than his deployment of police and military forces onto the streets of the city that had afforded him this temporary victory.

Nonetheless, to assume without further ado that a majority of voters will decide to work towards a new constitution on October 25 would be a mistake. A couple of days before my second encounter with the *guanaco*, at the large Cementerio General, two workers could be found sweating in the summer heat while cleaning pro-Pinochet graffiti off Salvador Allende's tomb using the combined power of a high-pressure hose and elbow grease. "VIVA PINOCHET" read the bright red lettering splayed across the back of the tomb, which the two workers had yet to reach. To the front, only a wet shadow of the original intervention remained. A bit further up the path, three young people dressed in all black were carrying out a discreet photoshoot among the dead, two of them sombrely embracing in front of the camera with the bright sun lending a fitting ambiguity to the gothic scene.

*

In Santiago, the potential for state violence has long coexisted with an everyday in which *guanacos* and *carabineros* sometimes seem unremarkable features that warrant no particular reaction or change in behaviour, and where voices for change mingle with those who still speak of the past with nostalgia. Seeing the *guanaco* facing the obstacle of a narrow corner took away some of its symbolic power and simultaneously highlighted just how banal the machinery of repression is. Being the sole witness to the slow removal of pro-Pinochet graffiti on Allende's grave underscored not only how the spectacular and the mundane coexist but how deeply these are entangled with one another.

In Chile, the issue of (constitutional) change is at once pressing and long-awaited,

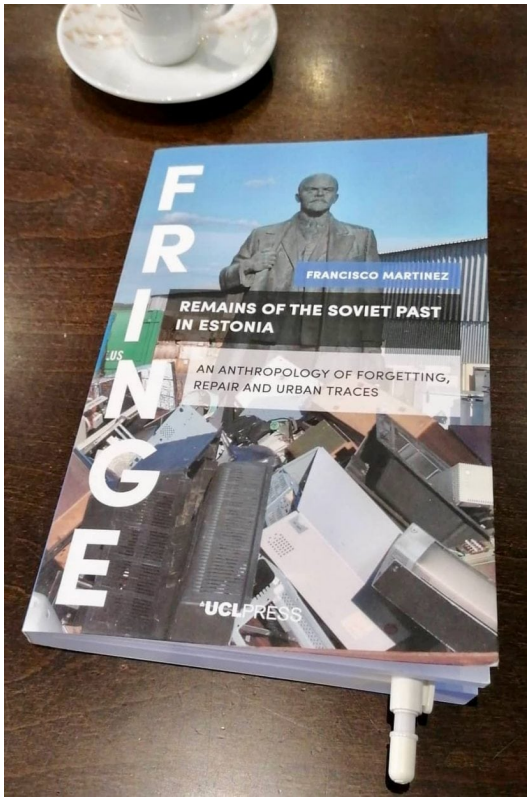
felt through bodily reminders—in people's faces, their noses, their eyes—and at times experienced as a present reality only at a comfortable distance. It is in the noise of chants and shouts at Plaza de la Dignidad and in the quiet of the cemetery. On October 25 we will find out how it presents itself on the ballot.

Featured image by Javier Collarte courtesy of Unsplash.

Conversation with Francisco Martinez on his work on the afterlife of Soviet cultural heritage

Francisco Martínez
October, 2020

Keiti Kljavin interviews Francisco Martínez on the afterlife of Soviet cultural heritage and his book [Remains of the Soviet Past in Estonia](#) (Winner of the Early Career Scholars Award 2018 of the European Association of Social Anthropologists).



KK: Francisco, what was the original trigger of your book? How did you become interested in the concepts of waste and repair?

FM: I wanted to understand the afterlives that the Soviet legacy was experiencing in Estonia. Then, I started to pay more attention to repair as a coping mechanism, as a sort of vernacular resource for adapting to radical changes. The idea of repair appeared as a way of working through the past, both empirically and analytically, and with interesting material and generational nuances. For example, while talking to repair workers whose skills had been devaluated in postsocialism, I realised that repairing grants a person dignity. Based on this, my book proposes to extend that approach to Soviet legacies, not for whitening them, but as a way of making legacies available to new generations. The recuperation of wasted legacies sets the bases for epistemic repair, making the past available in a different way.

While studying how remains of the past are reworked in the present, I also learnt that Soviet legacies were reduced to waste as part of the official strategy to build up the new state. Neglect had thus a practical use in building up national identity and making the state legible; that's what I tried to capture with the concepts of "active negligence", "condemnation of memory" and "wasted legacies".

KK: Don’t you not think that a great deal of stressing of the continuities with the pre-war Estonian Republic and the illegality of Soviet rule were understandable, given that in 1991 the survival of the re-independent country was uncertain?

Any new political regime inevitably involves a high degree of active forgetting as a consequence of a novel articulation of collective memory. Memory produces neglect by selecting what to care, and the new tends to make the old superfluous and redundant. But the Soviet past remains as a meaning-making reference. We can even say that postsocialism has been a way of reconstructing the recent past even more negatively than it was in order to measure the new present against it.

Then, for a couple of decades, the European Union brought normative and economic stability to Estonia; but we are now learning that such form of political solidity and wellbeing might end anytime, returning again to abrupt changes as the condition of existence of Estonia as a country. The making of Estonian citizenship and identity also remains an incomplete project until the grey passports problem is resolved politically, not biologically. Personally, I am also surprised that Russian is still not recognised as an official language in Estonia, at least in Ida-Virumaa (Eastern region). In 2020, it is a political anomaly.

I’m not interested in assessing if officially arranged forgetting is understandable or not, but to study the side-effects of such institutional strategy and the material and social disinvestments that it entails. Likewise, it is not my intention to judge whether forgetting is wrong or necessary, but rather to put the ethnographic eye on the iterance, traces and affects that forgetting generates. My way of being political is different than the one of a policy-maker.

In postsocialist countries, the past has not been a preparation for the present

KK: How?

I believe that my research is political by what makes visible, not by indicating to

politicians what to do. For instance, my work makes visible how forgetting was a desirable goal and positive process for some social actors, but not necessarily for the whole society, especially when a community shows a diverse ethnic composition, as it is the case of the Estonian. Forgetting entails a separation, relegating certain histories, people and spaces to the margins of normality. Does it mean that collective memory is wrong? Of course not! Rather it raises the question of whether people have any past to share as a plural community. And it also shows that, in postsocialist countries, the past has not been a preparation for the present.

KK: How does the Estonian case question the analytical value of postsocialism as a concept?

When combined with other ingredients, postsocialism is still a tasty concept. Try out, for instance, 'illiberal postsocialism', 'architectural postsocialism', 'short-minded postsocialism', 'standardizing postsocialism', 'post-post-socialism', 'forensic postsocialism'… we could stay the whole afternoon figuring out interesting combinations.

More seriously, I started my fieldwork relying on Caroline Humphrey's observation that generational replacement will make postsocialism disappear as a category, but during the research I changed my view and learnt that this concept is rather mutating, acquiring new meanings and explanatory potential, while leaving behind some others, and also travelling to other regions. So, still postsocialism is helpful for understanding contemporary experiences and for engaging with wider debates around the world, but in ways that might be different from those who worked with the concept in the 1990s. Hence, more attention should be paid to how the first post-Soviet generation makes use of concepts such as postsocialism and Eastern Europe.

Overall, the book demonstrates that the socialist legacy is still essential to an understanding of current developments in Estonia. However, my intention was not simply to reclaim the Soviet legacy and its value, but to assess what

postsocialism does and how it takes place and time in a multi-scalar picture.

KK: The chapter that studies the afterlife of the Linnahall, the multi-purpose venue designed for the 1980 Moscow Olympics is one of the bests. But in this case, you advocate that the building should be left as "a curated ruin".

This could be my favourite chapter in the book too. It is the first one I started writing and the last one I finished, because I wanted to make the whole structure more dialogical and to give more voice to the janitors, for example by including a series of photos taken by Peter, instead of simply including their statements as informants.

In Linnahall, one gets an impression of how certain buildings can be instrumental in reconciling the past, present, and future of a city. As a premature ruin, Linnahall is paradigmatic of what I mean by "wasted legacies", referring to vestiges that cannot be integrated within newly created structures and orders of worth, mostly because of political reasons yet also due to infrastructural issues.

As waste, Linnahall stands in excess. My suggestion to take care of the building as a curated ruin is one among other different proposals for the building; it is inspired by the work of Caitlin DeSilvey and Gabriel Moshenka, a geographer and an archaeologist. This shows the multidisciplinary character of my research, what I called in the book "a fringy anthropology".

Things are beautiful not because of being made, but because they last in time

KK: Can you explain more, what's fringy in this type of doing anthropology?

Fringy means to have a proactive initiative in the field, to be open, and loose, and indisciplined, and experimental, and in some instances loose. I suggest decentring ourselves a bit more, in a horizontal, or dialogical way. It is increasingly important to acknowledge the capacity to analyse complex information of our

informants, instead of always writing vertically the knowledge of others.

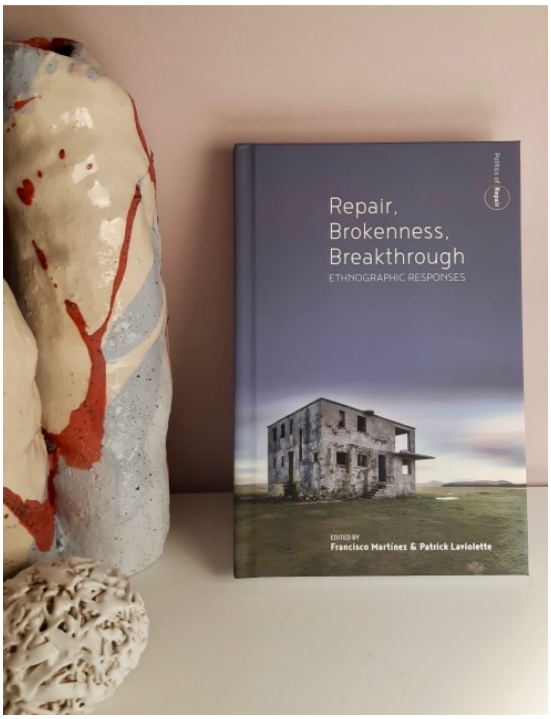
As I see it, the main aim of anthropology is to become aware of the limits and fragility of one's own world. Traditionally, we have done so by acting as professional strangers, borrowing epistemic positions. But nowadays our ethnographic subjects have become knowledge makers of analytical knowledge, and not simply knowledge holders, as colleagues like Marcus, Collier, Ferguson, Estalella and Sánchez Criado have noted.

Hence, I suggest decentring ourselves a bit more, in a horizontal, or dialogical way. It is increasingly important to acknowledge the capacity to analyse complex information of our informants, instead of always writing vertically the knowledge of others. Indeed, the most interesting anthropological ideas are nowadays appearing outside traditional disciplinary gates and academia. Policing the boundaries of anthropology is, therefore, counter-productive; more a sign of weakness than of strength.

KK: The focus on repair, and how it contests the short-term thinking incentivised by neoliberal capitalism, is interesting. You interview a number of people whose skills depend on repairing rather than producing, which have obviously become less useful in a late-modern society.

The study of repair is important and fruitful because it helps us to understand the current shifts in the relation between technology and power, and also between politics and bodies. It is paradoxical how discourses of 'newness' and innovation influence the public discussion of today's Estonia. While, on the other hand, there is an increasing fascination with old past forms, translated into memory, souvenirs, utopia, nostalgia, stranger things, and what not. It is even more complex, since despite current discourses of sustainability, we see a certain arrogance towards the recent old. Modern ideals make us believe that the urgent is to create more new things, while the important is actually to make things durable. Things are beautiful not because of being made, but because they last in time.

KK: This tension generated by how the vanquishing of old traces follows a different time than the political is also reflected in two other concepts of your book "aesthetics of amalgamation" and "architectural taxidermy". Could you expand on this?



In my research, I am interested in overcoming the preservation / demolition dichotomy, and explored the possibility of having a category in-between, such as "architectural taxidermy", which is a form of chimaera, a hybrid thing composed of parts from different architectural bodies. In the book, this concept applies to the way buildings come to terms with the new values, technology and social organisation. However, this notion of "coming to term" would be too rational, since it is a rather sinister form of domestication.

These concepts are an invitation to think temporal regimes in terms of mutation and side-effects; instead of a straight linear evolution. Less than ever, social and material changes won't be comprehended if merely applying a diachronic study, as many historians do. We need multiple ways of temporal representation, to combine heterochrony and dyssynchrony in academic research, as done, for instance, in contemporary art and contemporary archaeology.

An example of this is the former *Postimaja* (in Tallinn), designed by Raine Karp, and nowadays transformed into a shopping mall. The taxidermic renovation was based on the belief that past traces were not needed, only a recognizable face of

the corpse for domesticated touristification. What was originally proposed as a form of historic preservation, in practical terms it meant killing the building. Unfortunately, post-war architecture is still not thoroughly protected in Estonia. Because of being made during the Soviet time, they have been too often dismantled by pretending that they were being renovated, as if it were architectural taxidermy.

Regarding the other concept, I approached Tallinn's cityscape as an archive, paying attention to composing and decomposing materialities. Unfortunately, there is an intense uniformisation going on in town, and also efforts to cleanse the city's historical complexity, as in the case of the Maarjamäe Memorial

KK: One of the most affective parts of the book is about your repeated visits to Jaama Turg (Railway Station Market) and your conversations with the people there. What do you think the city has lost with its removal?

I am also fond of this chapter because it combines politics, material culture and methodological experiments in an intertwined way. Obviously, there has been improvement in the material conditions of the market, after the input of the new real-estate company. What I suggested in the chapter, however, was to go beyond the good and bad dichotomies, in order to see what has been lost in the process of change, and what is the contribution of the new place to the city at large. Despite being materially and economically precarious, the former market enabled diversity, was a gateway to the city centre for people living in the suburbs, and a space of camaraderie for those who were on the losing end of postsocialist transformations and globalisation, remaining more isolated and invisible in the suburbs these days.

Inclusiveness and accessibility are important in Tallinn, a city in which nearly half of the population is Russian speaking and the other half use Estonian, and with increasing economic inequality. With the new market, Tallinn has gained a new space for retailing services in the form of a shopping mall for hipsters, yet it has lost a place that was distinct. It could have been otherwise, if the municipality

would have invested some resources in upgrading the market, and applied regulations to limit ongoing gentrification.

KK: Your chapter about Narva reflects the plurality of experiences and identities found there by including the views of local people, who are variously positive, negative and completely indifferent towards the subjects of Estonia, Russia and the existence of a border separating them from Ivangorod across the river.

In the book launch at the *Püant* bookshop, (human geographer) Tauri Tuvikene said that he read *Remains of the Soviet Past in Estonia* as an ethnography of Tallinn, and that the chapters about Narva and Tartu were placed as mirrors of the capital. To be honest, I did not think my research in these terms, but it made sense what Tauri observed.

I wanted to show that Narva is ordinary in its own terms; catching a bit of the way of getting something done that is there, in contrast to the rest of Estonia. This is why the chapter has a kind of dialogical structure, as if the reader was taking a walk in the city and chatting with the people encountered on the way. Local

narratives show a wide range of levels of adhesion and deviation; for instance, ethnic Estonians might be presented as neighbours, rather than as belonging to one and the same family. But this does not mean that the rest are anti-Estonian, or non-Estonian; rather that they extend the political, cultural and religious meaning of what is to be Estonian, redrawing the contours of the nation-building project.

We tend to think of politics as a process of gaining consciousness about our surroundings, but quite often to be political is not a choice, one might *become* politicised also from external factors or actors, by being born in the wrong place, by their gender or sexual orientation, or by having a particular ethnicity. In many cases, people do not cross the line of politics, but it is the very line which crossed them, presenting rare features that could be well experienced as normal. This is the case of Narva, a city that is now on the border of the EU and NATO, and in which people who were calmly living in what they considered their country still have no citizenship or jobs. They became separated people, in the sense of living in-between, being neither fully Russians nor Estonians; but somehow from a divorced family.

Taking Narva as a centre out there will help this society become more inclusive and considerate of differences. Estonia is a small country, but not everybody here partakes of official narratives about the past and future. Nor it should be like that.

In Memoriam: Sally Engle Merry

Mark Goodale
October, 2020

Meg Davis

Sally Engle Merry got more of a kick than anyone I know from not only thinking big and aiming high herself, but helping other scholars to do so also. That openness, good humor and generosity of spirit were a key part of what made her impact as a scholar so huge.

> *How did she sustain such kindness and generosity of spirit, while also managing to be so amazingly productive and active?*

We met a few times at NYU over the years, but I got to know her a little better and to work with her during the three years I was a visiting scholar at NYU's

Center for Human Rights and Global Justice. I was working from Geneva at the time, and would fly over for a week or two of writing and meetings when I could put the funds aside. We had a series of lunches around the West Village whenever we were both in town. From proposing the topic of the book I wound up writing at NYU, to commenting on draft paper presentations, to ultimately recommending the book manuscript be published as part of the series on Law and Society which she edited at Cambridge University Press, she was supportive at every step of the way. Every time I reached out to her I fully expected to be ignored, as I might naturally expect from someone as renowned and busy as she was, and every time she responded positively and encouragingly — usually within a day. I only regret that time ran out before I ever got to know her well enough, beyond our professional relationship, to fully understand how she sustained such kindness and generosity of spirit, while also managing to be so amazingly productive and active. I am really grateful and humbled to have experienced it and to have the chance to continue to learn from her written work; and thankful to her family and friends for sharing her with the rest of us.

Mark Goodale: What would Sally do?

There will be many ways to remember and memorialize Sally in the months and years to come, but I thought I would say something about the lessons I learned from her over the years, lessons both professional and personal.

Sally was a legendary mentor to students and colleagues. It’s important to remember that she spent the first thirty years of her career teaching at her alma mater, Wellesley College, where she didn’t supervise her own doctoral students. Nevertheless, she mentored hundreds of graduate students over these decades in a more informal capacity, as well as serving on doctoral committees at different universities around the world. Indeed, this was how I first met Sally; like many, I suppose, I reached out to her as a doctoral student with a passion for the anthropology of law. This would have been around 1996 or 1997. From that

moment on, she played the most important role in my career, first as a mentor, then as a colleague, and finally as a friend.

There are many professional lessons to be learned from Sally's career, but the one that has shaped my own sensibilities more than any other has been the importance of a kind of scholarly steadiness. Leaving aside her much-appreciated introduction to the cultural dynamics of gender violence, her five other sole-authored books appeared like clockwork roughly every ten years: based on funded ethnographic research; complemented by corresponding journal articles; and developed conceptually through invited lectures, collaboration with colleagues, and a willingness to revise, reinterpret data, and view the project from different perspectives.

> *Sally embodied more than any scholar I've ever known the wisdom of the apparent paradox festina lente, "hurry up slowly."*

In this, Sally embodied more than any scholar I've ever known the wisdom of the apparent paradox *festina lente*, "hurry up slowly." Of course, this kind of quotidian scholarly regularity over many decades is only possible if there is real love for the process itself, even more than for the results. (Here, I can't help but think of Rilke, who said we should learn to love the questions themselves.) Sally loved her work, the long-term commitment to writing, the anthropological life—despite, or, perhaps because of, its mysteries, its contradictions, its unresolvable questions.

Personally, the ever-present lessons I learned from Sally are the importance of discretion, tolerance, and respect for colleagues, even—or especially—those with whom we disagree. Every time I have felt like blasting off an indignant email, I have thought of Sally and have almost always desisted, or have reframed the righteous missive to be understanding, understated, even ambiguously brief.

> *I ask myself: What Would Sally Do? Although it is difficult in many cases, I try and do what I know Sally would do: let her love light shine.*

During the multi-year project that led to *The Practice of Human Rights* (2007), I had the occasion to witness Sally's tact in action many times, something that was absolutely necessary among that group of alpha anthropologists. Sally's spirit of grace was something she applied to every situation: letters of recommendation, grant reviews, interactions with students. Any time I'm faced with similar choices, because our lives are filled with choices, I ask myself: What Would Sally Do? Although it is difficult in many cases, I try and do what I know Sally would do: let her love light shine.

See other obituaries here and here.

Carol Wang

Sally Merry was a brilliant scholar, but what stood out to me most was her generosity and kindness. As a young, 20-something working in the New York City nonprofit human rights world, I came across her work and it inspired me to pursue a PhD in anthropology. Although I did not end up at NYU, she nevertheless mentored me, sat on my committee, read all of my work, and often thought of me for teaching and research positions. All this she did while excelling in her field and leaving an indelible mark – both personal and professional – on each colleague and student she came across (as the many messages left in her memory show).

> *I don't know how she managed, but she appeared to do it all, and with so much grace and empathy.*

When life necessitated a move away from academia for me, she was supportive of that as well. It reminded me that she was not only a teacher and scholar, but a mother and a wife. As someone who also now inhabits these latter roles, I can only imagine the numerous demands on her time – and it makes me appreciate, even more, every second she shared with me. I don't know how she managed, but

she appeared to do it all, and with so much grace and empathy. I'll feel her loss for a long time to come.

Featured Image: Cover image (cropped) of Sally Engle Merry's book, Urban Dangers: Merry, S. E. (1981). Urban danger: Life in a neighborhood of strangers. *Philadelphia, PA*.

Photo of Goodale and Engle Merry, originally published on PoLAR.

Distributing Anthropological Films During the Pandemic

Viktoria Paar
October, 2020

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in the spring of 2020, when cinema theatres and university buildings closed, many film festivals decided to move their activities online. This moment of experiment with digital infrastructures exposed filmmakers and audiences to new possibilities for viewing and discussing films. Among anthropological filmmakers and festival organizers, it also led to renewed discussions about the longer-term project of sharing anthropological knowledge with varied publics, and the specific role of film festivals in curating, exhibiting and promoting anthropological cinema. What are the implications of moving these activities online? This was discussed during an online event of the ethnocineca International Documentary Film Festival Vienna on May 8, 2020, organised in collaboration with the Vienna Visual Anthropology Lab. The participants of this discussion were anthropologists who are also filmmakers or operate in the professional field of film distribution as festival organisers: Marie-Christine

Hartig, Andy Lawrence, Katja Seidel, Christos Varvantakis, and Werner Zips (alongside the authors). The discussion is summarised below, as a starting point for further conversations about the future of anthropological film.

What is distribution?

This online round table discussion was organised as part of the Vienna node of the #Distribute 2020 conference. Taking the #Distribute conference theme as a starting point, each speaker started with sharing their views on what "distribution" is or should be, from their perspective. They agreed on a view of distribution as "sharing", rooted in values of (non-hierarchical) exchange. Katja Seidel, co-director of ethnocineca in Vienna and senior postdoctoral researcher at Maynooth University, indicated that

"to me, distribute means to share something among people: to exchange stories and images and to enable the possibility to engage collectively. Rather than looking at distribution as a neoliberal idea in a capitalist market-oriented sense of the term, with an assumed centre from which knowledge, images or ideas are disseminated, I understand distribution as a non-linear process of circulation. (…). To me distribution therefore means to open up a space for conversations, critical thinking and mutual learning. Such an approach to films is also the motivational force behind our festival."

Ethnocineca co-director Marie-Christine Hartig agreed that distribution implies interaction, "and with interaction also comes responsibility." While all film festivals play an important role in the distribution chain of documentary film,

"ethnographic film festivals may take this responsibility even more serious, because when we talk about inequalities in the world, whose stories are we sharing? Whose stories are told, by whom? Whose stories are not common in the media at the moment? Issues that are considered as well when selecting the films."

Distribution is "a system of exchange" in which things acquire value through their movement and the social interactions that guide it.

A recurrent theme in the discussion was power inequality. Christos Varvantakis, from the Athens Ethnographic Film Festival (Ethnofest), sees distribution as collaboration and highlighted the need for promoting collaborations with a critical perspective on inequalities produced by global capitalism. Andy Lawrence, from the University of Manchester, took inspiration from Marcel Mauss' book *The Gift* (1924) to argue that distribution is "a system of exchange" in which things acquire value through their movement and the social interactions that guide it. Viktoria Paar, student at the University of Vienna and filmmaker, suggested that "it is very important to distribute from a low threshold, and not from a central authority, to create equal rights and actually to ultimately preserve human rights."

For Werner Zips, professor at the University of Vienna and filmmaker, ethical considerations play a major role in distribution, but in a different way than is often highlighted by anthropologists. While anthropologists tend to highlight introspective ethical reflection (e.g. about their relations with the film participants), a much less discussed ethical problem is the control of national entities, police, or even secret services over the work of researchers and filmmakers. The privileged European anthropologist is perhaps rarely exposed to consequences, but many people can be threatened with dire consequences if they are seen as resisting a regime:

"The official procedures involving content control and intelligence clearance had a major impact of most of my film projects for the past few years. Many states have considerably stepped up their requirements for official permissions. Various forms of message control affected the final editing and framing of results. This is even more problematic when indigenous peoples or minority groups in my film projects are under critical surveillance and state heteronomy."

A much less discussed ethical problem is the control of national entities, police,

or even secret services over the work of researchers and filmmakers.

Changing film festivals

The round table focussed on film festivals as a specific format for screening anthropological cinema. Film festivals have long been a venue for the curation, exhibition, and promotion of films produced by anthropologists. They have functioned as platforms for selecting and evaluating films, seeing and discussing films, and for building communities and creating social encounters (Peirano and Vallejo 2017, 3). Due to their peculiar position outside the walls of academia yet closely linked with the discipline of Visual Anthropology, festivals have been somewhat ambivalent spaces (Ginsburg 1998), operating as a bridge between anthropologists and various other kinds of storytellers and audiences.

If the technological infrastructures in which film festivals operate have always been dynamic, the COVID-19 lockdowns were paired with particularly rapid changes as festivals responded by going online, often in a hurried way. To discuss these changes, we discussed a question posed by Faye Ginsburg in the preface of the book *Film Festivals and Anthropology* (by Peirano and Vallejo 2017, xv): what happens to the festival as we move forward into a future of new technologies, which raise their own intellectual, ethical and practical challenges?

> *Outside the walls of academia, yet closely linked with the discipline of Visual Anthropology, festivals have been somewhat ambivalent spaces.*

The speakers emphasised the public role film festivals have in the cities where they are organized. Through both films and side programmes, festivals connect anthropologists, filmmakers, and other audiences – these encounters also enable the sharing anthropological ideas and knowledge outside academia. At ethnocineca in Vienna, Hartig explains,

“we always start the festival with a keynote lecture by invited scholars, to show what the discipline of Visual Anthropology has to offer in terms of contemporary thoughts and issues. This is always free of charge, and as the festival attracts a wider audience, not only scholars and academics come.”

The Athens Ethnofest, Varvantakis adds, has started screening films on new topics such as “work”, “precarity” or “gentrification”, which are highly relevant to the city of Athens. This offered an opportunity to contribute an anthropological perspective to ongoing discussions in the city. As a student-filmmaker, Paar appreciates this, stating,

“we can say that film festivals in this form can bridge the distance. And in my eyes, that is a topic of anthropology. Now more than ever anthropology has the task of building bridges to make it possible to understand the processes and phenomena in the world”.

Due to these functions of accessibility, networking and community building, and interaction with local publics, the idea of going online with the festival was discussed with some cynicism. “We cannot transform film festivals to online formats so easily,” Varvantakis pondered. While the idea of an online festival is discussed in Athens, he worries what that would mean for the function of the festival in establishing social cohesion among visual anthropologists. Especially “for younger filmmakers: to let their films being screened and discussed and being in a community, which is caring and provides support.”

The social aspect of the festival was also underscored by filmmaker and film producer Andy Lawrence:

“I like to observe people watching films, especially the films I have made myself. I understand more about a subject as private fieldwork encounters are made public through cinematic viewing. Vulnerabilities are shared as we place ourselves and co-fieldworkers on a screen in front of audiences, who blink in unison or avert their gaze from uncomfortable scenes. There is something that profoundly connects us when we tune in personally and share collectively, where the

experience of the protagonists of our films, our experience as filmmakers, and the experience of the cinema audience somehow merge and mix – this is most intense in the cinema."

The viewing experience helps to shape people's understanding of a film: "As a maker who attends film festivals this absolutely affects me, and my presence at the event also impacts on how the audience remember the occasion," Lawrence added.

The idea of going online with the festival was discussed with some cynicism.

These and other longings for the cinema hall were triggered by our inability to watch and discuss films together during this first online edition of the ethnocineca festival. As a result of social distancing regulations, each of us was Zooming in from our living room, and we lamented not being able to continue the discussion informally afterwards, in the foyer or at the bar.

It was amidst these longings for the theatre that we reflected on the online futures of anthropological film: "We are in front of historical possibilities," Varvantakis stated, as film festivals and related institutions can now build on their know-how to support the development of democratic and decentralised digital infrastructures: "The available technologies should go together with the ethics of open access and of collaboration." In the online future of distribution, festival directors will "go green to take responsibility for the climate" (Hartig) and "continue pushing the quality of ethnographic film, multi-perspectivity, and establishing spaces for reflection" (Seidel). Zips added in agreement that we should not play one medium against another when reaching out to non-specialised publics and filmmaking partners: "I think we should have complementary means to reach a wider audience."

What, then, is the future of anthropological film distribution? Online will stay. Experiment will be the norm. And as this moment of longing for the cinema hall becomes a memory, it becomes a reminder of the need to cherish spaces for

exchange, discussion, and shared experience.

Further discussions about the online future of anthropological films are planned at the RAI Film Festival Conference, 25-28 March 2021, in the panel "Rethinking anthropological film distribution: radical sharing beyond the crisis".

Featured Image

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Note:

Some of the quotes that appear in this article have been slightly edited in consultation with the speakers.

#Open Call: Allegra Lab / EASA LawNet webinar series in honour of Sally Engle Merry

Allegra
October, 2020

This series of online, public seminars features presentations that examine the current state of legal anthropology. We welcome contributions from anthropologists working on ‘the law’ in the broad sense of the term, including ethnographic studies of bureaucracies, national courts, international tribunals, truth commissions, human rights and other international governance processes

(to name just a few).

> *The seminars will be an opportunity for young and more established scholars in anthropology of law to engage in vigorous conversations on matters of critical relevance to contemporary societal debates.*

We dedicate this webinar series to Sally Engle Merry, Professor of anthropology at New York University, president of the Law and Society Association, the American Ethnological Society, and the Association for Political and Legal Anthropology, who passed away on 8 September 2020, and whose pioneering work on culture and rights, gender violence, and human rights indicators has been highly influential on the subdiscipline and beyond. In memory of her generosity as a teacher and colleague, and in line with her innovative spirit, the seminars will be an opportunity for young and more established scholars in anthropology of law to engage in vigorous conversations on matters of critical relevance to contemporary societal debates.

The series will take place once to twice a month on Fridays (time tbc) from November 2020 to May 2021. Presentations should not exceed 20 minutes and will be followed by a short response by a discussant and a Q&A. All are welcome to join the webinars, which will also be live-streamed from the Allegra Lab website.

Please submit an abstract of max. 250 words to submissions@allegralaboratory.net by **Sunday 25 October 2020**. Note that presenters may be asked to act as discussants in another webinar session in the series.

Featured image: Photo (cropped) by Wonderlane on Unsplash

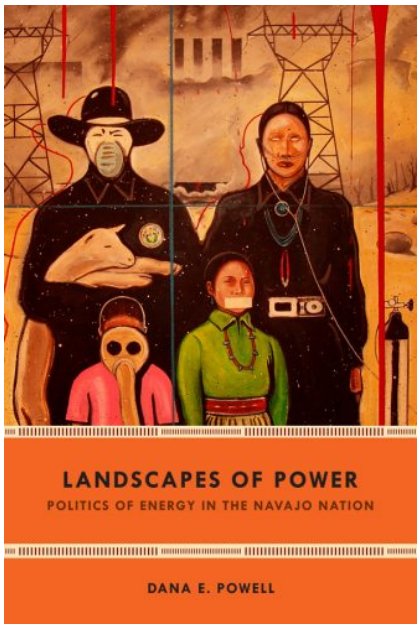
Landscapes of Power

Nimisha Thakur
October, 2020

The cover of Dana Powell's book, *Landscapes of Power,* taken from a painting by Diné teacher and muralist James B. Joe titled *Bleeding Sky,* is our first glimpse into the embodied impacts of settler colonial energy infrastructure "made visible in disfigured bodies and ruined landscapes"(Powell 2018:190).

The image of a Diné family from the Navajo nation, wearing masks and requiring oxygen cylinders to breathe set against a backdrop of crisscrossing electrical

wires, emphasizes the interconnections of settler colonial violence on indigenous lands and bodies. The image simultaneously implies that indigenous resistance lives on in this refusal to be seen through a colonial gaze. This refusal time and again appears in *Landscapes of Power* which outlines the complexity of indigenous sovereignty and its historical entanglements with energy politics, amongst the indigenous communities inhabiting the Navajo Nation who identify as Diné.



Powell traces the breakdown of a proposed coal plant called Desert Rock in the Diné community home of T'iis Tsoh Sikaad (Place of Large Spreading Cottonwood trees), renamed Burnham, New Mexico by the US settler colonial project. The failure of Desert Rock raised questions about the Navajo nation's home being used for energy mining which produced electricity for localities outside the nation while indigenous community members struggled to acquire running water and electricity. *Landscapes of Power* emphasizes that the battle over Desert Rock which ensued between Dine community members, Navajo nation council members and Sithe Global Power (the corporation behind Desert Rock), revealed that the settler colonial project did not have clear cut political actors. Instead it appeared that indigenous community members held diverse political stands for and against economic 'development' through energy projects in the Navajo Nation.

What are the acts of resistance demonstrating that indigenous sovereignty does not exist "simply inside nor outside the American political system but rather exists on these very boundaries, exposing both the practices and contingencies of American colonial rule"(Bruyneel 2007:xvii, as cited in Powell 2018:11)? This is a question that *Landscapes of Power* seeks to answer by emphasizing interconnected yet often divergent voices that come up in the Navajo nation's challenge and subsequent defeat of the Desert Rock project and the corporations

behind it. The aftermath of Desert Rock emerges as a point of convergence and continuing discussion of indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. In these discussions, Diné communities emphasize the historical continuities in the settler colonial logic of dislocating indigenous communities by unmaking the physical and sub-surface constitution of their homelands and rendering them inhabitable. Drawing from my research interests in understanding the embodied landscapes that are intertwined in indigeneity discourses in India, I focus on Powell's vivid contextualization of Diné placemaking within energy politics and its implications for a just energy future.

Powell weaves an intricate picture of the lived experiences and fears of Diné communities who live in proximity to the proposed Desert Rock site. Community members fear that water sources and in turn their bodies will be contaminated from coal runoffs : this sentiment derives from exploitative histories of uranium mining in the Navajo nation.

This 'uranium boom' caused high cancer rates and deaths in the 1980s and was termed "environmental racism and a genocidal act of colonialism" (Shirley 2006, as cited in Powell 2018:51). Diné oral histories and creation stories talk about living in harmony with sub-surface agents such as uranium and coal by preventing human interference with these elements, which when disturbed as Desert Rock envisaged would adversely impact the lives of communities living closest to the site. Community members protested their physical and compositional dislocation from their homes through the narration of creation stories that emphasized their historical connection to their homelands known as Dinetah, that was attempted to be altered by the Desert Rock Project. By recounting memories of Dinetah, and its slow unmaking through coal and energy projects, members emphasized the continuities in the settler history of energy politics while also emphasizing that the fight against Desert Rock was a reclamation of Dinetah.

Powell weaves an intricate picture of the lived experiences and fears of Diné communities who live in proximity to the proposed Desert Rock site.

Sithe Global, the company behind Desert Rock, sought to present the proposed coal based power plant as a global movement towards sustainable energy and used the term "relocation" instead of displacement for the indigenous communities who had homes close to the proposed site. These disguised moves were challenged by activist organizations such as Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment (Diné CARE) that mobilized ethical-cosmological thinking . *Landscapes of Power* thus brings into focus the transnational language of the settler logic of elimination (Wolfe 2006, as cited in Powell 2-18:9) while contextualizing it within conversations about global capitalism and climate change.

Similar discourses are seen in state advocacy for hydropower, oil and coal plants in India's 'frontier' regions such as Assam and Kashmir. Though the histories of Assam, Kashmir and Dinetah (referring to Diné community envisioning of their homeland beyond settler boundaries) are vastly different, there are parallels in the ways in which settler colonial states use the discourse of modernity and development to lay claim over people and land categorized as frontiers or entry points to its development. The settler colonial imagination conceives indigenous lands as barren and empty places to be occupied for developmental projects. This perception of the Navajo Nation in Burnham, New Mexico saw Sithe Global Power pushing to develop the region through Desert Rock while in reality the benefits of the proposed energy infrastructure were distributed away from native communities. Challenging this settler colonial imagination through claims of Dinetah, Dine communities pointed out the reality of their homes as "a place inhabited by families, sheep, and vast desert ecosystems"(196). In contrast to the proponents of Desert Rock, Diné communities and specifically women (who exercise leadership over territory, and livestock) conceive their landscape as a place full of life

In my own project in Assam in northeastern India, tribal women similarly point out that hydropower projects located within their homelands create immediate disastrous impacts such as flooding and arsenic contamination while their own homes do not have electricity. Similarly, in Kashmir, northern India, women often

actively resist state imposed hydropower plants which dislocate their communities and thwart resource sovereignty for women who require access to these resources to sustain their families (Bhan 2018:67-68). The adverse impacts of energy colonialism are thus felt by communities inhabiting these 'frontier' regions while the flows of energy move away from their own localities to be distributed elsewhere.

> *In my own project in Assam in northeastern India, tribal women similarly point out that hydropower projects located within their homelands create immediate disastrous impacts such as flooding and arsenic contamination while their own homes do not have electricity.*

Indigenous studies scholar Mishuana Goeman talks about the interconnections between the destruction of indigenous homelands through oil pipelines, coal projects and hydropower projects and the accompanying dislocation and eradication of indigenous communities by settler states in the United States and Canada (Goeman in Barker eds. 2017:99-100). Powell further reiterates how gendered this destruction becomes as does the labor involved in sustaining life after settler destructions of lived environments. This is a point emphasized by Diné women's personal testimonies in *Landscapes of Power*. They are often underrepresented in the Navajo nation's tribal government and in the context of Desert Rock, they advocated for alternative energy sources such as wind and solar energy power plants which could create economic opportunities while also ensuring a sustainable source of energy for indigenous homes within the region.

Women across the three sites mentioned above: in Kashmir, Assam and Dinetah point out that energy infrastructure changes the constituents of the environment and land they inhabit, disturb sub-surface elements such as dust, uranium, coal which are ultimately responsible for the pollution of air and water, that further gets embedded inter-generationally in their bodies as contaminants. *Landscapes of Power* highlights Dine women's advocacy for solar energy as part of a move towards sovereignty through a control over solar installations in their homes. The

relative certainty of solar energy's renewability is also emphasized in accounts such as Miriam Johns', who lives in an off-grid home in the south-central region of the Navajo nation: "You never know what the future might bring – earthquakes or other things that might shut down the power lines. Now, I'm with the sun people"(108).

> *Powell's Landscapes of Power brings to light through energy landscapes the historical and continuing settler dynamics of energy extraction.*

Such accounts abound in Powell's centering of Diné women's understandings of their lived landscapes while an absence of these gendered views of the landscape in Navajo Nation official energy policies is also noted by community participants. These gendered dissonances in debates on an energy future have implications for the settler colonial logic of elimination which attempts to impose a heteropatriarchal logic of colonial discovery and dominance over indigenous lands. However, as Powell points out, the various voices and contestations of energy politics that emerge in the 'boundaries of the American political system'(11), speak to the complexities of indigenous sovereignty and its intricate entanglements with settler colonialism.

Powell's *Landscapes of Power* brings to light through energy landscapes the historical and continuing settler dynamics of energy extraction. *Landscapes of Power* traces the interdependencies between indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism but also reveals that the settler state deliberately designs the double bind of needing to be recognized by the settler state while also refusing it. However, Powell's discussion of the inherently exploitative nature of the settler state could have become even clearer through a greater exploration of gendered understandings of indigenous futurism, a concept that is briefly touched upon in Chapter 5 but is also present in Diné community dialogues, testimonies and art discussed across the book.

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Read Lena Gross' review here.

Read Susannah Crockford's review here.

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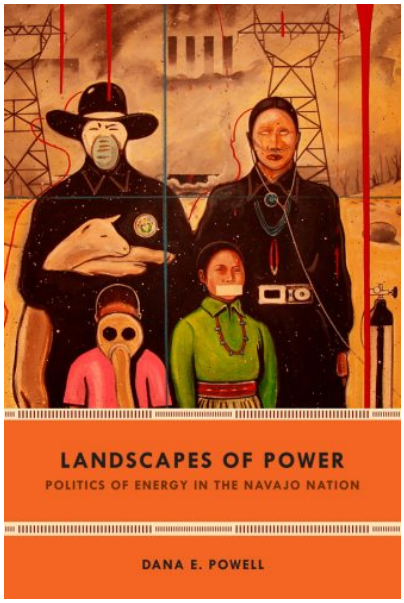
Landscapes of Power

Lena Gross
October, 2020

In her monograph *Landscapes of Power*, Powell takes the proposed – at the time of her initial fieldwork – development project of the coal plant Desert Rock on Navajo land as an entry point into energy projects and their entanglement with issues of Indigenous sovereignty, power structures, and colonial history. At the turn of the millennium, Desert Rock was one of the most contested new energy developments in the US, and, even though it never materialized, it affected and changed different power relations.For Powell, the material absence of Desert Rock becomes an object of inquiry. She brilliantly shows not only how to research something that is not (yet) in existence, but also why it is important to do so.



For her, the absence is generating, giving space to imaginations of the future, to alternative ways of knowing, and to hidden aspects of landscapes, power, and sovereignty. The absence of materiality does not mean that the projects do not exist. They exist as a reminder of the continuation of histories of extractions, displacements, and colonial abuse, and their meanings exceed their material impact.

In my research, I am looking at a proposed quartz mine in the border region between Norway and Sweden. Although the mine has yet to materialize, it has already come into existence through imaginations, public discourse, and a long bureaucratic paper trail. Reading Powell's work, I was struck by the many parallels between our two cases despite the different political, historical, and cultural contexts.

> *I will present some of these similarities to show how Powell's locally rooted research is equally relevant internationally and how her concept of 'four modalities of power' is a useful tool for thinking through other cases of extraction.*

About 20 years ago, ELKEM Salten applied for a mining concession in the mountainous region called Nasafjellet in Norway. The quartz mine would be situated in the middle of core reindeer herding ground for several Indigenous Sámi groups, an area through which up to 40 000 reindeer migrate on an annual basis.

Several environmental impact statements (EIS) were made, however both the applied methods and their findings were criticised as incomplete and in some

parts biased. EIS evaluated the likely environmental impacts of proposed development projects including inter-related socio-economic, cultural and human-health impacts, both beneficial and adverse.

Powell follows the process of developing an EIS that – like the whole Desert Rock plant – never came into existence. EIS are written in bureaucratic language, assigning values to landscapes, fauna and flora, reindeer herding etc. In the report, the authors translate and summarise scientific knowledge into (for educated lay persons) more comprehensible language. Powell shows that the format of EIS does not allow for other ways of knowing than those of western science. In her example, the EIS fails in taking into account cultural specifics and Indigenous knowledge. Powell discusses how female Elders were ignored in the election of Indigenous "experts" and how knowledge transmission through narratives did not fit into the time schedule of community hearings.

This erasure shows overarching issues that commonly appear whenever natural resources are extracted on Indigenous lands: The hearings and information collection are designed in terms that favour knowledge and knowledge production that follow hegemonic European and North American academic traditions. Additionally, the imagined audience are readers that are familiar with technical language and used to long documents. Looking at which voices and knowledge are included exposes both structural hierarchies and ethnocentric assumptions as Powell shows throughout Chapter 4. Media and public discourse about extractive projects often display the same biases as EIS and lack a discussion of the historical, cultural, and societal complexity of industrial developments on Indigenous lands.

Both opponents and proponents of energy or extractive projects often base their argumentation (partly) on environmental reasoning. Indigenous opponents to proposed industrial projects are often equated to environmentalists in public discourse. While some might indeed identify themselves as such, this positioning erases the subjective commitments that for many are at stake, and especially issues of Indigenous sovereignty. Referring to Audra Simpson's concept of refusal

(2014), Powell argues that the refusal of Navajo citizens to be called environmentalists is an “affirmation of a way of being and knowing that is itself a collective commitment” (242 – 243). The dichotomy of being against or for industrial development projects is a false binary. As Powell shows, Indigenous nations are often divided about industrial projects. Working in extractive industries, claiming royalties, and advocating industrial developments on their land has the same roots as opposing them: working towards a good life for their nation and preserving Indigenous sovereignty.

In the case of the quartz mine, there was unity amongst Sámi organisations. When Sámi reindeer herders did further oppose the mining operation, ELKEM filed a motion in late 2017 to expropriate them. At the time of writing, the decision is still pending.

However, to understand the implications of ELKEM’s motion, the geographic positioning of the mine, the meaning of reindeer herding for Sámi cultures, and the history of forced displacements, livestock reductions, and assimilation politics need to be addressed.

Consequences of the expropriation would go far beyond the area in question, as the impact assessments also show. Transporting workers and mined materials, but also noise, dust, and necessary infrastructure will disturb reindeer herding grounds on a much larger scale than the mine alone and would presumably lead to a mixing of different herds, losing reindeers, reduced births, and in general animals in poorer conditions due to human induced stress. Livestock reduction can in the worst-case lead to the interruption of reindeer herding.

Relations to reindeers have been central to Sámi culture since time immemorial. From hunting reindeer to different forms of herding reindeer, Sámi people have tended relations to this species over several thousands of years. Coastal Sámi who did not engage in reindeer herding and had fishing and small-scale farming as their main subsistence activities were also included in these human-animal relations, as they participated in gift exchanges and trade interactions that

involved reindeer meat and other material coming from the animal. Reindeer have also had a significant role in Sámi religion and spirituality prior to Christianisation. Reindeers and reindeer herding are therefore one of the most central symbols of Sámi cultural identity. Like sheep for the Navajo (Powell 2018, 45), reindeers are both companion species (Haraway 2003) and a source of life itself, giving nourishment, warmth, and wealth to their owners. The meaning of the expropriation would therefore by far exceed the local scale of lost land.

Imposed livestock reduction and forced displacement are recurring topics for many Indigenous nations worldwide. Powell describes the overpowering collective memory of terror, betrayal, loss and grief that is activated by discussions of resettling people and livestock in order to make space for industrial developments. She shows how both industry and governmental representatives do not consider the historical trauma of violent relocation and the repeated colonial targeting of sheep-holding as means of subduing Navajo resistance. In Scandinavia, shifting national borders and assimilation politics led to the displacement of many Sámi groups and to families losing their reindeer herds. Prominent cases of conflicts between individual reindeer herders and the Norwegian state show how these experiences are still ongoing, though in different ways.

Powell's book is a call to observe and listen. Powell asks us as researchers to focus more on absences as objects of inquiries and shows us throughout the book both the importance of it and how one can do so. She also situates her work firmly in decolonial thought, mercilessly questioning her right to conduct research as a white anthropologist. It provides an instruction on how to research extractive projects on Indigenous lands. This makes her work highly relevant also beyond her topical or geographical focus.

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Other reviews in this symposium:

Read Nimisha Thakur's review here.

Read Susannah Crockford's review here.

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