

## RECLAIMING POSSESSION: A CRITIQUE OF THE DISCOURSE OF DISPOSSESSION IN INDIGENOUS STUDIES

JULIAN REID

[reidjulian@gmail.com](mailto:reidjulian@gmail.com)

<<https://ulapland.academia.edu/JulianReid>>

Julian Reid is Chair and Professor of International Relations at the University of Lapland, Finland. He is the author of several books including, most recently, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (written with David Chandler). He is currently Principal Investigator of the Finnish Academy funded research project *Indigeneity in Waiting* (2016–2020).

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# Reclaiming Possession: A Critique of the Discourse of Dispossession in Indigenous Studies

## **\_Abstract**

Indigeneities are widely constructed as emanating not only from the experience of dispossession in the historical past, but as ways of being in the world which are grounded positively in dispossession, and which in being so offer themselves as antagonistic alternatives to Western ways of being, grounded aggressively as they are in possessiveness, of land, of self, and of others. This essay argues that the opposite is true; that the present condition is one of being governed by regimes of power the strategy of which depends on the production of dispossessed and non-possessive subjects. The task is to reject these discourses of entrapment and reclaim possession for ourselves. In doing so much can yet be learned from minor traditions of thought and practice among indigenous peoples, both mythic and real, which, in contrast to today's dominant discourses on indigeneity, insist on the integral importance of possession as a foundation for political subjectivity. Whether indigenous or non-indigenous, the task is the same; avoid being trapped by power, learn instead to hunt power, and cultivate the ultimate freedoms of autonomy and self-possession.

## **1\_Introduction**

Indigeneity is more or less universally defined by claims concerning the experience of dispossession of land and culture, and indigenous critique is defined by a range of different claims concerning how this condition of dispossession can best be responded to, by indigenous peoples themselves as well as by anyone concerned with the present plights of indigenous people. There are, of course, multiple differences between indigenous peoples, and 'being indigenous' means different things to different peoples. This reality is testified to, also, in the multiplicity of ways in which dispossession has been experienced among indigenous peoples, in different regions of the world, and in different historical periods. Possession, too, has meant different things to different indigenous peoples in different times and places. Prior to Mexican independence, indigenous communities of Colonial Mexico made use of colonial judicial mechanisms to defend their traditional land rights — a quite different form of possession compared with that of indigenous communities in North America. However, in spite of this multiplicity of ways in which dispossession has been experienced, and in spite of the multiplicity of possession as a practice, there is an overriding assumption that being indigenous is to have in some way undergone dispossession, and to be dispossessed.

In response to the assumed universality of this condition, some argue for the return of land into indigenous possession, while many others argue that indigenous ways of

life are intrinsically hostile to the very practice of possession, which is seen to emanate from a specifically Western way of life. This essay is especially interested in forms of critique that valorize the condition of indigenous dispossession as a foundation for re-thinking not just the futures of indigenous peoples, but the future of the West and all societies globally. Do indigenous peoples offer alternative models of existence that non-indigenous peoples might learn from in order to overcome the possessive ways of being that have caused so much damage? In contrast to Western modernity, it is claimed that indigenous peoples have no interest in turning their world into property. An indigenous approach to life and world starts from the principle, it is said, that “we belong to the world, the world does not belong to us.” The task is one of learning to live with the land, in the understanding that we are possessed by it, rather than it belonging to us for our own use and benefit. Indigenous critique holds that the conceit of the West, both historically, and still today, is that of its belief in the ability to possess the land, subordinate it, and exploit it as an object for human satisfaction. This essay considers this line of argument and draws out some of the risks inherent to accepting it.

## **2\_Becoming Indigenous?**

Being indigenous means different things to different constituencies of indigenous peoples as much as it means different things to different exponents of indigeneity within the West. However, a dominant trend within indigenous critique extols the capacities of indigenous peoples as ideals that the West ought to emulate.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous peoples are celebrated for their willing subordination to the world, their refusals to consider themselves superior to other living species (or even to consider living things superior to non-living things), and their capacities to live in a state of perpetual crisis by accepting that security is impossible. This is an image of the indigenous that both scholars and powerful actors worldwide argue the West must learn from and ultimately seek to embody.

This move of the West to embrace, as well as produce, a certain image of indigeneity, and by inference, indigenous peoples, undercuts some of the thrust of contemporary indigenous critique, which has argued for an image of the indigenous as peoples whose ways of life and being are incommensurable with settler colonialism; peoples who, in being the ways that they are, refuse to let go of themselves.<sup>2</sup> What if those ways, supposedly so distinct from Western ones, are now found to be conducive to the projects of Western regimes? How to make sense of what is taking place in this embrace? Is it

an appropriation of knowledge of the sort that indigenous scholars warn against?<sup>3</sup> And if so, does it not undercut the very claim to marginality that those same scholars insist on as the necessary standpoint for indigenous inclusion within the academy?<sup>4</sup>

Too much of indigenous critique and too many indigenous critics have simply sought to take advantage of this appropriative move and repeat its dominant mantras, without seeing the traps into which they are falling. It is true, of course, that many representatives of indigenous peoples, as well as many ethnographic observers and admirers of indigenous peoples in the West, identify resources in their knowledge and their ways of being which, in their idealized descriptions, hold out the possibility of healing our common relationship with the world.<sup>5</sup> Indigeneity is offered, quite literally, as a way of being which all can potentially embrace, and through which humanity in its entirety can set aside the ways of the colonist, and learn how to live anew.<sup>6</sup> Crucial in this process of 'becoming indigenous' is the matter of human relationships to land and world. 'Becoming indigenous' means living as if your children's future mattered, and taking care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, I argue that such a way of becoming indigenous does not provide an alternative to the dominant and all-powerful regime of subjectivity extolled by neoliberalism, which dominates the human not least by seeking to regulate its relationships to the world. This is not intended as a critique of indigeneity as such; much of indigeneity and indigenous ways of life gets left out of this discursive framing. In effect, the frame functions to discipline indigenous peoples as much as the Western populations who must learn to live within it. Once we step outside this framing and engage with the many different realities of indigenous peoples, indigenous thinking, and indigenous practices, we encounter forms of thought and practice which directly conflict with this disciplinary frame, and which can contribute to an alternative pathway, not just for indigenous peoples, but humans everywhere concerned with recovering the human imagination from its political debasement. I am interested in the terms and conditions by which indigenous people can 'refuse to play the part' they have been assigned, and in this sense I seek to further an analytic of indigeneity that finds resonance with the work of Elizabeth Povinelli, who has demonstrated how such refusals occur in the context of the ways in which liberal regimes seek to recognize indigenous difference.<sup>8</sup>

In this essay, I am concerned specifically with the discursive framing of indigenous peoples as dispossessed subjects. By this I mean not simply the ways in which indigenous peoples are recognized, increasingly, as having historically been dispossessed of their lands by settler colonial states and other regimes of power, but also the ways in which their dispossession is valorized today. In contrast to Western modernity, it is claimed the indigenous have no interest in turning their world into property. An indigenous approach to life and world starts from the principle, it is said, that “we belong to the world, the world does not belong to us.”<sup>9</sup> This is not just a normative claim. The task of becoming indigenous is believed to develop from a recognition that it is simply impossible to possess land in the ways that have been assumed in the West. The task is to learn how to live with the land, to understand that we are possessed by it, rather than us possessing it for our own use and benefit. Indigenous critique holds that the conceit of the West, both historically and today, is a belief in its ability to possess the land, subordinate it, and exploit it for its own satisfaction.

Taking the logic of dispossession further, some argue that indigenous peoples have no concept of possession as such. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, the American writer Rebecca Solnit describes the language of the Wintu people of California as having no concept of the self as distinct from its other.<sup>10</sup> Without an understanding of what is other, the self has no understanding of possession, for only things that are other than the self can be possessed. We presuppose the self when we lay claim to possession. Linguistically, at least in English, this is evident in our expressions of possession: I say “my arm, my leg, my body, my thoughts, my imagination, my friend, my house, my world, my land,” and so on. In the language of the Wintu, no such notion of ‘my’ exists. As the anthropologist Dorothy Lee explains, “the Wintu have a conception of the self which is markedly different to our own.”<sup>11</sup> For them, the self is ontologically implicated in a world of things which it cannot possess, but which may be said to possess it. This is an image of the self as radically dispossessed, and as itself an object of possession. For Solnit, this other way of being in the world and experiencing the self is a source of wonder, attraction, and potential emancipation for the Western subject, who still erroneously believes in its own autonomy from the world.<sup>12</sup>

Against this emancipatory image of the dispossessed subject, I will pose the figure of Don Juan, the Yaqui Indian, whose knowledge and intelligence is described in the ethnography of Carlos Castaneda. In the encounter between Castaneda and Don Juan,

we see the mapping of a path towards becoming indigenous, but a path which projects itself towards a very different horizon than today. The world Don Juan teaches Castaneda about is not the ecological world of flora and fauna — knowledge about which has become strongly associated with indigenous peoples today — but the psychic world of the subject, and the faculties of will and practices of power through which the human can subdue it: Don Juan instructs his inquisitor in how to “stop that world.”<sup>13</sup> There is nothing dispossessed in Don Juan. He seizes the world in order to stop it. Castaneda himself, the ethnographer, enters into his possession on a spiritual plane, entrapped by the old Indian.<sup>14</sup> Don Juan instructs Castaneda, not in the knowledge of plants, but in techniques of the self, and especially in the arts by which one can avoid becoming possessed by others. The teachings of Don Juan are, in other words, a master class in the development of autonomy and freedom from others, and allow us to theorize indigeneity in conjunction with our own aspirations to theorize the human’s capacities to transcend its world and its relations to other people, and secure itself from that world and whatever it finds dangerous in it.

### **3\_Dispossession?**

Dispossession figures large in debates over indigenous peoples and the theorization of their oppression. In terms of the will to combat liberalism and its theories and practices of the oppression of indigenous peoples, this focus is understandable.<sup>15</sup> Liberal arguments dating back to the 17th century on the nature and right to property, especially those on the right to claim ownership of land, were fundamental to the colonial project and the ‘gigantic process of expropriation’ by which indigenous peoples were subjected.<sup>16</sup> Colonizers would not have been able to justify their projects without the underlying theories of property that legitimated acts of dispossession.

Of all theories of property, John Locke’s has proved the most powerful in legitimating colonial dispossessions of indigenous peoples. Locke claims that only peoples who mix their labor with the soil of the land on which they live, and who not only improve, cultivate, and develop it, but in doing so, subdue it, can claim the right to own it. As Locke put it,

God, when he gave the World in common to all Mankind, commanded Man also to labour, and the Penury of his Condition required it of him. God and his Reason commanded him to subdue the Earth, \* *i.e.* improve it for the Benefit of Life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his Labour. He that in Obedience to this Command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby

annexed to it something that was his *Property*, which another had no Title to, nor could without Injury take from him.<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between those who subdue and develop the land and those who leave it “to Nature without any improvement” such that it becomes “uncultivated waste,”<sup>18</sup> has historically provided the basis for the dispossession of indigenous peoples of the right to land.<sup>19</sup> This distinction concerns not simply, of course, the relationships of peoples to particular lands, but their relationships to ‘the Earth’ and ‘the World’ as such. Have the people in question subdued the world given to them by the Christian God, and through their development of the soil become its master, or do they live ignorantly in subordination to the world, “rich in Land” and yet “poor in all the Comforts of Life,” living off the land without improving it, and thus themselves forming part of the world over which developed human beings can claim both mastery and ownership?<sup>20</sup> These questions underlie the Lockean theory of property and inevitably provided the basis not just for the dispossession of indigenous peoples of the lands on which they lived, as well as the denial of their right to land, but the racism which in turn legitimated the long history of continuing violence against them. No wonder, then, that the development of supposedly post-liberal theories of political subjectivity should involve reflection upon the nature of dispossession itself.

The distinction is often utilized by indigenous scholars and activists themselves<sup>21</sup> to point out that indigenous peoples have not only been subjugated and oppressed by the West, but also “divested of their lands, the territorial foundation of their societies, which in turn have become the territorial foundations for the creation of new, European-style, settler-colonial societies.”<sup>22</sup> Dispossession has thus been construed as a specific kind of process, intrinsic to colonialism, and fundamental to the indigenous experience of the violence of the West. This much would seem obvious. Indeed, we do not even need to read indigenous scholars to discover it: This way of approaching indigeneity and understanding the nature of indigenous subjugation under conditions of colonialism can easily be encountered in Western thought itself. Karl Polanyi, writing in the mid-20th century, described how “the social and cultural system of native life” is shattered once “the native” is dispossessed of the land on which he or she depends.<sup>23</sup> Polanyi, despite being an early 20th-century Viennese economic historian, shared much of the ontological worldview we are now taught to associate with indigenous peoples.



“Land,” he argued, “is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s institutions [...] it invests man’s life with stability; it is the site of his habitation; it is a condition of his physical safety; it is the landscape and the seasons. We might as well be born without hands and feet as carrying on his life without land.”<sup>24</sup> He decried the economic and political rationalities that motivated the dispossession of indigenous lands by colonizers for much the same reasons the indigenous still do today, damning them as a “death blow” to indigenous peoples.<sup>25</sup>

As a concept within modern political discourse, however, dispossession has a much wider history, originating in the 17th century, not just in Locke, but in the ideas of activists and thinkers challenging the institutions of landed aristocracy in Europe. In the 18th century, it developed most significantly in the work of Rousseau, who identified the origin of all violence in dispossession and the establishment of property, as well as the wide range of forms which warfare, conflict, and competition would gradually assume among humankind, and their attendant emotions, desires, and states of perception:

A black inclination to harm one another, a secret jealousy that is all the more dangerous as it often assumes the mask of benevolence in order to strike its blow in greater safety: in a word, competition and rivalry on the one hand, conflict of interests on the other, and always the hidden desire to profit at another’s expense; all these evils are the first effect of property, and the inseparable train of nascent inequality.<sup>26</sup>

By the 19th century, it had become integral especially to anarchist claims of the illegitimacy of modern property, albeit more often articulated in terms of “expropriation.”<sup>27</sup> For Marx, it played an absolutely essential role in understanding the historical development of capital and its predicted downfall.<sup>28</sup> “The expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil” formed the pre-history of capital, he argued, while the expropriation of exploitative capitalists by a revolting working class would shape its end.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, the expropriators are themselves to be expropriated by this one revolutionary class that seeks the abolition of capital through its dispossession, while other classes fight against capital only to save their existences.<sup>30</sup>

Marx himself often employed the German term *Enteignung*, only to shift in his later work to the Latin term ‘expropriation.’ When *Das Kapital* was translated into English, the terms of dispossession and expropriation were employed interchangeably, suggesting that there is little difference between the two concepts.<sup>31</sup> Today, and for whatever



reason, the concept of dispossession would seem to have become the more powerful, at the very least with reference to indigenous politics, but also considering wider trends in critical theory, exemplified by influential works by leading thinkers such as David Harvey and Judith Butler.<sup>32</sup> Within this trend, it is possible to detect differences concerning the politics of dispossession. There is a contrast, at the very least, between Butler, who eschews possessiveness as a property and capacity for progressive visions of what political subjectivity might become, as well as aligning herself forthrightly with indigenous movements the world over, and Harvey, who maintains a belief in the progressive potentials of processes of dispossession in so far as they can contribute to more universally socialist futures, as well as being cognizant of the ways in which indigenous movements sometimes function to prevent the realization of such futures, so long as they “refuse to abandon their own particularity.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Harvey also notes how, in the recent past, indigenous movements have not only prevented projects for the realization of socialism, but also created a ‘Trojan Horse’ for CIA-sponsored offensives in promotion of neoliberal regimes, such as in Nicaragua in the 1980s, where the United States took advantage of the resistance of Miskito Indians to socialist development in order to wage war against the Sandinistas.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of these political differences, the concept of dispossession is argued to be of great relevance for understandings of the “territorial acquisition logic of settler colonization” which has underpinned both liberal and socialist models of development emanating from the West.<sup>35</sup> “A settler-colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of domination; that is it is a relationship where power — in this case, interrelated discursive and non-discursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power — has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority,” writes Glen Sean Coulthard.<sup>36</sup> Coulthard recognizes the importance of Marx’s insights for addressing the dispossessive natures of both colonialism and capitalism, while also underscoring the distinctive nature of indigenous peoples’ experiences of exposure to these regimes of power. Rejecting Marx would be a mistake for indigenous peoples, he maintains, arguing the necessity of revising the Marxian framework in conversation with the critical thought and practices of indigenous peoples themselves.<sup>37</sup>

One crucial point for revision is that dispossession cannot be considered a process confined to a particular historical period, as Marx suggested it might. It is indeed ongoing today, Coulthard maintains.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, it cannot be considered, from an indigenous perspective at least, a necessary stage in the process of capitalist expansion, such that it provides the foundation for a subsequent developmental and progressive stage of socialism.<sup>39</sup> Coulthard argues that Marx and Marxists have been mistaken in viewing colonialism as simply a feature of capitalism, and that it is necessary, by contrast, to focus on colonialism independently from capitalism, in order to comprehend the functions of dispossession from an indigenous perspective. The power relationship of a settler-state such as Canada to indigenous peoples has been fundamentally organized around the dispossession of their lands, and not the extraction of their labor.<sup>40</sup> Crucially, as Coulthard also asserts, it is the dispossession of land, and not the extraction of labor, that continues to shape the dominant modes of indigenous resistance and critique.<sup>41</sup> The theory and practice of indigenous resistance to colonialism has to be understood, he argues, as a struggle oriented around “the question of land.”<sup>42</sup> As many other indigenous scholars have argued, as a historical process and technique of power, this question has particular relevance for indigenous peoples because so much of indigenous knowledge and culture emanates from their relations to land.<sup>43</sup> Being dispossessed territorially has meant being dispossessed of the very knowledge on which indigenous cultures and ways of being are based. Thus is it that the struggle against dispossession has to mean a struggle to foster systems of indigenous education premised on indigenous knowledge and intelligence emanating from the land.<sup>44</sup> The indigenous subject strengthens itself by recovering its relation to the land. Its knowledge and intelligence grows the more and better it is able to recover that relation.

Anger at having been dispossessed of one's own land pervades the literatures of indigenous peoples. It is an anger that is directed at what the Aboriginal thinker Aileen Moreton-Robinson names the White Possessive: that subject whose sense of belonging, home, and place in the world derives from the dispossession of “the original owners of the land,”<sup>45</sup> including indigenous peoples such as her own, the Goenpul tribe, a part of the Quandamooka nation of Stradbroke Island in Queensland, Australia. Unlike other exponents of indigenous critique, however, Moreton-Robinson does not reject the concept of possession altogether. Her critique is concerned with distinguishing between indigenous and Western accounts of who is the land's rightful possessor. She sees not

simply a conflict between two different parties, but a struggle that pitches two conflicting concepts of possession against each other: on the one hand, the White Possessive, who subscribes to a liberal account of possession compatible with “the logic of capital,”<sup>46</sup> and on the other, an indigenous concept of possession, in its “incommensurable difference,” based, as Moreton-Robinson asserts it to be, on “an ontological relationship with land.”<sup>47</sup> In claiming possession of the land, the indigenous subject also understands itself, in what might seem like a paradox, as belonging to the land. For this is what having an ontological relationship to land entails: You are part of the land as much as the land is part of you; you are not simply its transcendental possessor in the supposedly non-ontological sense in which the White Possessive claims ownership.

Some ambiguity exists, then, as to whether the indigenous project implies their attempt to recover a prior relation of possession with land, on account of their being its rightful owners and ‘ontologically’ embedded in it, or whether it is a project based around the celebration of dispossession as such. The latter perspective is better expressed in the work of Jennifer Adese, who distinguishes more simply and clearly between indigenous peoples who “live with the land” and Westerners, who live in subordination and exploitation of it.<sup>48</sup> In the words of one Metis elder quoted by Adese, Adrian Hope, “we belong to the land, the land does not belong to us.”<sup>49</sup> From the perspective of an indigenous community such as the Metis, it is simply not possible to possess land, irrespective of what Moreton-Robinson might say. The task is one of learning how to live with the land, in understanding that we are possessed by it. The conceit of the West, both historically and today, it is maintained in these strands of indigenous critique, is a belief in its ability to possess it.

The condition of being without possession of land, then, when seen from some influential indigenous perspectives, is not in itself to be decried. The problem is being dispossessed of the relation with land fundamental to indigenous subjectivity, knowledge, and intelligence. To a certain extent, this nuancing of the condition of dispossession and loss of land in indigenous critique contradicts the otherwise widely made assertion of the ‘theft’ of indigenous lands by colonial powers. What has been stolen is not simply the land, but a way of being in relation with land that is avowedly not based on possession of land as such, and for this reason, ‘loss’ might be a better operative term than ‘theft.’

It is also for this reason, perhaps, that the colonial dispossession of indigenous peoples has led not simply to arguments for the return of those lands to indigenous peoples, but an articulation of the experience and condition of indigenous dispossession itself as a basis on which to theorize both their subjectivity under conditions of colonialism and political subjectivity on a universal scale. Such thinking is encountered forcefully in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's *Dispossession*.<sup>50</sup> Their project is to consider dispossession both as an act, "as one way that subjects are radically de-instituted," and also as an attribute of the subject which offers a counter-movement to the forces of dispossession.<sup>51</sup> In other words, in addressing the histories and continuing realities of a form of power which dispossess indigenous peoples and others groups, they want to contest it on these deeper terrains of its subject-formations. The problem they identify is that not simply of the right to dispossess, but the assumption of possession at the heart of the liberal subject: the assumption of having transcended nature that was crucial to the distinction between colonizing and colonized subjects. Butler and Athanasiou want to avoid any avowal of a subject which "possesses itself and its object world, and whose relations with others are defined by possession and its instrumentalities" in the development of struggles against regimes of power which serve to dispossess indigenous peoples.<sup>52</sup> "Prizing the forms of responsibility and resistance that emerge from a 'dispossessed' subject," they underline their awareness that "dispossession constitutes a form of suffering for those displaced and colonized."<sup>53</sup> For this reason, they express solidarity towards those indigenous peoples who have been historically dispossessed of their lands, accompanied by a normative gesture of constraint upon the indigenous, lest they seek recourse to the forms of possessive individualism Butler and Athanasiou otherwise identify with colonizers. "How to become dispossessed of the sovereign self and enter into forms of collectivity that oppose forms of dispossession that systematically jettison populations from modes of collective belonging and justice" is thus their question.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, it is the question of how to oppose forms of dispossession in ways that function doubly to produce dispossessed forms of subjectivity.<sup>55</sup> Too many social and political struggles against dispossession are thought to perpetuate the same logic of possession that accounted for the original dispossession from which those struggles emerged. As Libby Porter expresses it,

the social field of rights-based struggle becomes stuck in a mode that seeks parity only within the frame of liberal 'possessive individualism'. Rights under this conception are a bundle of things that can be possessed, held, alienated and exchanged, and express the positionality of a possessing unitary subject.<sup>56</sup>

The project of liberalism, taken to be that not merely of dispossessing peoples of their lands for liberal development, but of reconstituting those peoples as liberal, requires that they too partake in the logic of possession, becoming themselves possessive subjects who claim rights to property and procedures consistent with their liberalization. This invitation to become possessive, partake in the logic of possession, and emerge a fully-fledged liberal subject has to be refused. Indeed, one could summarize the thrust of a wide range of critiques, deriving from postcolonial theorists and critical indigenous scholars, as expressing the urgency of this refusal, including pre-eminent authors such as Porter, Pasternak, Coulthard, Moreton-Robinson, Simpson, and Nichols.<sup>57</sup>

In many ways, this critique still lives in and off the shadow of Fanon. Since Fanon, at the very least, we have known that the invitation is not what it seems to be. One cannot move from colonized to liberal subject without conceding fully to one's subjugation to the colonial schema. The sustainability of colonial power depends on the capacity to transform the colonized population into subjects of imperial rule.<sup>58</sup> Liberation from colonial subjugation requires the colonial subject to wage war on that schema itself.<sup>59</sup> Embracing the logic of possession cannot work, therefore, as a mode of resistance to liberal colonialism. It does not work to produce justice even in the most naive senses. When peoples have been dispossessed of the lands on which they live, or as is often the case nowadays, displaced from one place of abode to another, the ability to come into possession of another land, or another place, simply does not do justice to the loss experienced. "There is no genuine space in compensation payment calculus to attend to the loss and grief of a neighbourhood abandoned, the bulldozing of a home, the erasing of memories or the shattering of lives," as Porter argues.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, as Porter admits, this critique does not quite apply in the case of indigenous claims. It is, as she expresses it succinctly,

a different manifestation of a possessory calculus at work in the recognition politics around indigenous land rights, for clearly indigenous claims are intrinsically linked to particular spaces. The whole notion of indigenous property is that it is inalienable, and cannot be traded for another locale on the planet.<sup>61</sup>

The struggles of indigenous peoples to re-possess their lands through the claiming of indigenous title rights is real and ongoing, and meeting with some success — in Australia, for example. The royalties being paid to title-owning indigenous people by mining companies has led to a growing Aboriginal middle class. Of course, success here is measured simply in terms of the socio-economic betterment of Aboriginal peoples under market conditions: their abilities to exploit their possessions through trade with other market actors, particularly resource-seeking extractive industries. This fact remains deeply problematic for anyone concerned with the deeper political problem of the growing entrenchment of liberalism and the underlying colonization of the indigenous.

Similar problems and dynamics have been observed in the Canadian context by Shiri Pasternak, who describes the ways in which indigenous struggles against the legacies of colonialism, and in particular attempts to overhaul the Indian Act in Canada, involve indigenous groups taking political positions, which only serve to entangle them further with neoliberal logics of possession.<sup>62</sup> The lack of private property rights on Indian reserves deprives indigenous groups of access to home mortgages, and therefore credit, which in turn excludes them from the market economy, it is argued by some representatives of indigenous communities in Canada.<sup>63</sup> In these terms, the struggle for indigenous enfranchisement asserts a right of the right to possession, which in turn subjects indigenous groups to neoliberal governance.<sup>64</sup> Opposition to dispossession is thus believed to require a different mode of engagement; something other than a mere struggle for possession.

In Pasternak's view, the key difference is between collective and individual rights of possession, and the struggle between collective and individual rights of possession is the key terrain on which larger struggles against settler colonialism take place today.<sup>65</sup> The struggle of indigenous groups to overcome the forms of poverty they have been subject to by colonialism has to avoid falling into the neoliberal traps that promise economic enfranchisement through the degradation of the very collectivities that constitute indigeneity. Colonialism is presented within the imaginaries of such promises as simply the denial of access to the market economy, and thus neoliberalism is able to present itself as an anti-colonial force.<sup>66</sup>



#### 4\_Performativity?

Butler and Athanasiou call this non-entrapped form of politics “performative.” Performativity describes how dispossessed subjects produce themselves as political subjects in the contexts of their dispossession without resorting to an assertion of a self-possessed and possessive subject.<sup>67</sup> It is a politics, they argue, which applies to and can be found among a remarkably wide variety of subject positions: indigenous peoples dispossessed of their land, but also refugees and the stateless, the *sans papiers*, and migrant laborers, as well as sexual minorities such as transgender people, “dispossessed by regimes of gender and sexual normativity.”<sup>68</sup> Regardless of the normative constraint against becoming-possessive, these are groups whose precarious conditions prevent, in actuality, an assertion of “the logic of possession.”<sup>69</sup> The performative emerges, they argue, “precisely as the specific power of the precarious — unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself — to demand the end to their precarity.”<sup>70</sup>

Butler and Athanasiou discuss a certain number of concrete instances of performativity: the singing of the United States national anthem in Spanish by undocumented immigrants in the streets of Los Angeles in 2006,<sup>71</sup> the street demonstrations and self-immolations in Morocco and Tunisia in 2010 and 2011, which contributed to the revolutions of the Arab Spring,<sup>72</sup> hunger strikes,<sup>73</sup> the marches of women across the deserts of Northern Mexico to protest rape occurring there,<sup>74</sup> the performance art of Regina Jose Galindo.<sup>75</sup> All of these are held up as instances of peoples dispossessing themselves in order to dispossess coercive powers.<sup>76</sup> Other instances discussed and theorized by scholars of performativity include naked blogging, such as that by the Egyptian Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, whose posting of pictures of herself in the nude is seen to have contributed not just to the Egyptian revolution of 2011, but to a reconfiguration of the body politic and a re-imagining of the theater of the political.<sup>77</sup> The use of public nudity by the Femen movement, including their mobilization against Islamic oppression through the “international topless jihad day,” is also discussed in this framework.<sup>78</sup> We might also think of the poignant acts of self-dispossession occurring right now on Mediterranean shores, where people open their homes to refugees dispossessed by warring regimes in Syria and elsewhere.

What all such instances have in common, Butler and Athanasiou argue, is that “rather than implying a transcendent euphoria of effective will or redemption,” their per-

formance “pertains to the ordinary and extraordinary forces of endurance and survival.”<sup>79</sup> This is not a politics which aims to constitute a subject of possession, but one that (re-)produces its dispossession while also seeking to displace present regimes of dispossession through “a labor of sensing, imagining, envisaging, and forging an alternative to the present,”<sup>80</sup> an alternative grounded in the condition and subject of dispossession. How, indeed, to dispossess the dispossessed of any desire to become the possessor is the deeply ironic and paradoxical task they set themselves. In this sense, whatever the authors might discursively claim, their work is also an argument for dispossession in the negative sense they claim to oppose. It presupposes a politics that can only function through modes of dispossession performed upon peoples, and not simply in opposition to it. It is a politics which constructs a particular kind of body, a body which is obdurate, persistent, insistent on its continuous and collective thereness, organized without hierarchy, enacting its message performatively through the occupation of public space and the display of this body, individually as well as collectively, only. It is not a body that can ever or will ever master the space it occupies.

The argument, of course, is that this way of performing political subjectivity is necessary as a turn away from and against the liberal tradition of thinking and practicing political subjectivity, based as it supposedly has been on the assumption of a body which masters, possesses, and improves the space it occupies. Instead, we have to grasp the body as a thing which performs a poesis in space, where poesis is understood to be a double movement involving both de-subjugation and self-making. This understanding of the body, or indeed ‘the subject’ as such, derives from Butler’s interpretation of Foucault’s account of the subject, whereby poesis is said to be the central practice in and of subject formation. Poiesis is central to the mode of existence of the subject, Butler argues, which must risk itself in making itself in order to de-subjugate itself from particular regimes of truth.<sup>81</sup> This is not a theory of the subject as transcendent or masterly or in possession of itself or others. Rather, it posits the idea that there can be no formation of self or subject outside of subjugating modes of subjectivation. The subject is always, regardless of its capacities to make itself, orchestrated by power.<sup>82</sup>

In the work of Butler and others, we can see that the indigenous subject is undergoing a transformation. No longer construed simply as a subject which calls for political solidarity in a struggle against colonial or neoliberal domination in order to assert its repossession of worlds of which it has been robbed, it is now seen to perform a new

understanding of politics and ontology through a way of being dispossessed that challenges hegemonic ways of asserting possession. Here, it is not resistance, but defeat itself that is celebrated.<sup>83</sup> The indigenous subject is not to be conceptualized in terms of what worlds it might stake a claim for, but in terms of what it has been turned into by the very regimes that have exploited it.

## **5\_Reclaiming Possession**

As a concept, possession also has, of course, spiritual connotations. We speak of someone possessed by spirits, by ideas, by passions, or simply by forces that move him or her this way or that. It is an embodied state that we associate with a range of ways of being. In the worlds of indigenous peoples, there are many instances of shamans and sorcerers, figures who developed and employed practices of such possession to achieve various ends. The world of the indigenous is not merely made up of plants, animals, nature, and ecosystems, as is so often presupposed by indigenous critique, nor is the task with respect to the world simply to learn to accept our being possessed by that world. The world is there, in the words of Don Juan, the Yaqui Indian sorcerer, encountered by the great anthropologist, Carlos Castaneda, “to be stopped.”<sup>84</sup>

Castaneda’s study of Don Juan is controversial due to the questionable nature of the ethnographic research on which it was based, but authoritative voices in the field of anthropology have credited it with being among the greatest works the discipline has produced, precisely because of how it deploys the imagination as method.<sup>85</sup> For the purposes of this essay, it is of great relevance for its illustration of the conflict between different ways of becoming indigenous. When Castaneda seeks out Don Juan in Arizona, it is to learn from him about plants.<sup>86</sup> Castaneda is convinced Don Juan, as a holder of indigenous knowledge, knows a great deal about certain plants, which can be of relevance to his anthropological research. Don Juan dismisses this interest of his inquisitor, saying “there is nothing to learn about plants, because there is nothing to say about them.”<sup>87</sup> He denies Castaneda’s desire to learn in the manner fundamental to Western interests in indigenous knowledge today. There is a vast gulf between the model of subjectivity and form of knowledge imparted by Don Juan and that which today’s self-appointed representatives of indigenous knowledge offer us. For Robin Wall Kimmerer, for example, the future of the human species depends fundamentally on its abilities not just to learn about plants, but to learn from plants. Plants themselves

are the holders of the deepest wisdom, she maintains, and can potentially teach us how to live: “Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out.”<sup>88</sup>

Don Juan, like Wall Kimmerer, is interested in what can be known of this world, and how indeed one can learn to live, for such learning is a project and an art. Yet when pressed by Castaneda on his knowledge of the plants of this world, Don Juan rebuffs his interrogator. This is not to say that Don Juan rejects Castaneda; rather, he wants to engage the ethnographer on the subject of the world in a different way. The world Don Juan is interested in discussing is not the biological world of flora and fauna, knowledge about which has become so strongly associated with indigenous peoples, and to questions about which he reacts with “despair and disbelief,”<sup>89</sup> but the psychic world of the subject, and the faculties of will and practices of power through which the human can subdue it. Don Juan will instruct his inquisitor in how to stop that world.<sup>90</sup> There is nothing dispossessed in Don Juan. He possesses the world, not the other way around. Castaneda himself, the ethnographer, enters into his possession, entrapped by the old Indian.<sup>91</sup> Don Juan will instruct Castaneda, not in the knowledge of plants, but in techniques of the self, and especially in the arts by which one can avoid becoming possessed by others. The teachings of Don Juan are a master class in the development of autonomy and freedom from others.

The first lesson Don Juan gives Castaneda in this vein is in “erasing personal history.”<sup>92</sup> Don Juan describes how he, like so many indigenous peoples, had a “terribly strong attachment” to his own history and to that of his Yaqui people.<sup>93</sup> Castaneda the ethnographer tries to pin him down: “You are a Yaqui. You can’t change that,” he says.<sup>94</sup> “Am I?” Don Juan replies. “You don’t know what I am... You will never know who or what I am, because I don’t have a personal history.”<sup>95</sup> Don Juan’s lesson in the erasure of one’s history is deliberately aimed, as he explains, at avoiding being trapped by others, averting the danger of being pinned down and caught in the discursive framings of others.<sup>96</sup> Questions about one’s history are “a bunch of crap.”<sup>97</sup> This is not a practice of the Yaqui people, but of Don Juan alone, in disregard of his ethnic identity and any affiliation to a people. Erasing our histories makes us “free from the encumbering

thoughts of other people.”<sup>98</sup> Instead of playing into the traps of identities and the discursive framings of others, Don Juan maintains it is best to “build up a fog around yourself” and cultivate “the ultimate freedom of being unknown.”<sup>99</sup>

Throughout contemporary indigenous critique, we encounter the claim that indigenous subjectivity is defined by a sense of the interconnectedness of the self to others. The life histories of indigenous peoples are said to “show a moral ordering of sociality that emphasizes mutual support and concern.”<sup>100</sup> Don Juan, in contrast to this dominant image of the indigenous subject, emphasizes the importance of disconnection as life practice and as the basis of ethics. “Your friends, those who have known you for a long time, you must leave them quickly,” he advises Castaneda.<sup>101</sup>

What Don Juan is really concerned with is truth: the search for it, and the ability of the subject to align itself with its own truths, to act without doubt or remorse. “I have no doubts or remorse,” he says, “everything I do is my decision and my responsibility,” because in this world “there is no time for regrets or doubts. There is only time for decisions.”<sup>102</sup> Don Juan seeks to free the self from doubt and attain the power of decision which is the hallmark of sovereign subjectivity. This is the major source of inequality between Don Juan and Castaneda, not the knowledge of plants which Castaneda seeks out the Indian for, but the powers of decision, as well as perception, which distinguish Don Juan’s relation to the world from that of the anthropologist. If Don Juan is to be the anthropologist’s informant, he will reveal only how to achieve a powerful relation to the world and become “a hunter and a warrior,” in distinction to “the pimp” Castaneda, an impoverished subject who does not know how to fight his own battles, but only those of other peoples.<sup>103</sup> Is hunting the way of the Yaqui Indians, asks Castaneda. Don Juan replies in the negative.<sup>104</sup> It is pointless to try to reduce the ways of relating to the world Don Juan describes to his indigeneity. It is simply a superior way of being, one which creates its own “world of precise acts and feelings and decisions.”<sup>105</sup>

## **6 Conclusion**

Indigeneities are widely constructed as emanating not only from the experience of dispossession in the past, but as ways of being in the world grounded positively in dispossession, and which offer themselves as antagonistic alternatives to Western ways of being, which are grounded aggressively in possessiveness of land, self, and others. This

essay has argued that the opposite is true, that our present condition is of being governed by regimes of power, emanating from the West, whose strategy depends on the production of dispossessed and non-possessive subjects. The task is to reclaim possession for ourselves and to reject these discourses of entrapment. In doing so, we can yet learn much from minor traditions of thought and practice among indigenous peoples, both mythic and real, which in contrast to today's dominant discourses on indigeneity, insist on the integral importance of possession as a foundation for not just political subjectivity, but human ways of being as such. Whether indigenous or non-indigenous, the task is the same: to avoid being trapped by power and instead learn to hunt it, and to cultivate the ultimate freedoms of autonomy and self-possession.

## Endnotes

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