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Isolation, Otherwise

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One of the most pressing questions for the contemporary anthropologist is how the isolation of Indigenous life is once again so good to think, for politics and theory alike.

Of course, the paradox is that this renewed search for the primitive coincides not with more grounded evidence of pure exteriority, but with less. Recently, new technologies of surveillance have joined the unchecked expansion of industrial agribusiness to provide more precise insights into the actual existential conditions of those few populations who ostensibly exist beyond the reach of history, the state, the market and social relations. Almost without exception, these revelations do not illuminate pristine alterity. Rather, these messy entanglements reflect and create frontier situations that repurpose histories of colonial violence in the name of future redemption. We can conclude that the particular contexts and lived contents of isolation always exceed and subvert the assigned, ideal-type form. The point; however, is that appealing to the empirical does nothing to diminish the dizzying allure and nearly irresistible power of this peculiar figure of life. Precisely the opposite appears to be the case. This begs the question: Why isolation now?

Surely, part of the appeal lies in how mobilizations around isolated life manifest a moral and political stance towards our forecasted futures of collective disaster no less than disciplinary anxieties about anthropology's potential to intervene or evoke inhabitable alternatives. Elsewhere, I have described the figure of isolated life as a generative political imaginary; one that reformulates the global politics of legitimate Indigenous life in ways that make it uniquely able to organize the vital contents it purportedly describes. I tracked the emergent politics of isolation across a broad range of investments – conceptual genealogies, international law, multicultural state policies, humanitarian NGO interventions, genetic science and ethnographic engagements with Indigenous mobilizations – in order to suggest one main point.

The politics of isolation redistributes the meaning and value of Indigenous life in ways that are governmentally expedient. It does so by establishing a new hierarchy of life in which bounded, ahistorical and anti-relational difference is privileged over and above the kinds of difference asserted within local theories of being and immanence, or those taken as the product of unequal relations and colonial histories. What is new about this framework for moral action is that it often extends the ways in which such uneven cultural legitimacies are politically intelligible as biolegitimacies and vice versa. The collapse of cultural and bio-legitimacy marks a shift in the kind of indigenous life that global politics is interested in. What is distinct about isolated life is not its unique eligibility for inclusion into the exceptional states of already existing politics, but rather, that it is a form of life created by such stagings of humanitarian exception and the transnational government of emergency. Here, the state of exception produces the only Indigenous subject that is capable of fully fitting within its predetermined boundaries. Moreover, the gap between the content and form of isolated life is instrumental. It defines the life of non-isolated Indigenous peoples in relief. This is an especially high-stakes process for those whom Clifford Geertz memorably described as ex-primitives, those ambiguous, unruly beings whose ties to legitimating origins are rendered impossible, refused or suspect. Among other things, the disconnect instantiates amplified forms of violent dispossession aimed against the stigmatized multitudes of actual Indigenous peoples who no longer fit within the constricting criteria of cultural legitimacy. Such retooled forms of dispossession, in turn, are intrinsic to the structures and dynamics of late liberal governance.

This governmental project unexpectedly resonates with renewed scholarly investments in the so-called “otherwise”, or the search for alternative worlds and futures within ethnographic archives and ontographic descriptions. All too often; however, this search for the “otherwise” begins and ends with redoubled investments not in actually existing exteriority but in the already intelligible limits of authorized alterity. Paradoxically, investments in these pre-given limits may work to standardize multiplicity itself. The figure of isolated life is one of the maximal expressions of this general trend, but it also provides the clearest evidence for the real-world consequences of such projects. If we hope to engage and shift the real human tragedies unfolding across the Americas, it is clear that we cannot confine either critique or our search for the “otherwise” to the terms of pure difference known in advance. Instead, what is needed is an approach based on thorough understandings of particular conditions of concealment, a pragmatic suspicion of existing structures of intervention, as well as the lawlessness of legal categories, and commitments to collaborative actions that include speculation, but are never confined to it. Such an approach implies certain reversals in conventional approaches to isolation, which is less an existential state than an urgent question amenable to ethnographic analysis. That is, taking the conundrums of isolation seriously undoes the fetish of the isolated subject by investing in its opposing image: a shared and related humanity that is intrinsically unfinished, incomplete and open-ended. Doing so implies a new political lexicon for anthropological critique. It is one that can only begin by thinking isolation “otherwise.”