Radical Migrations through Anishinaabewaki

An Indigenous Re-Mapping of the Great Lakes

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Disheartened, disfigured, decapitated. The dismembered corpse of ante-capitalist societies lay at the feet of Western imperialism. Karl Marx, in his Eurocentric (yet prophetic) prose, named the ongoing economic practices of indigeneity "pre-capitalist." From this teleological and developmentalist perspective, capitalism functioned, and continues to operate, as the necessary evil needed to eventually escape this very system's kraken-like tentacles. But, as I will highlight in this exploratory essay, it does not need to be this way. Capitalism is not the only specter haunting contemporary society; it has simply been our dominant modality. Inversely, pre-capitalist and Indigenous epistemologies allow us a foray into the prefigurative practices that projects like the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor struggle to initiate. In this brief introduction and a series of interviews, I hope to indicate the prefigurative potentiality embedded in indigeneity.

Since 1492, when Columbus infamously sailed the ocean blue, capitalism and its parallel practice colonialism have instigated a never-ending process of global market expansion. While not denying this system's significance, I wonder what would happen if those of us struggling against the on-going threat of capitalism chose to disavow Columbus and his centrality to our lives. What would happen if we re-mapped our society, not using colonial cartographic systems, but re-imagined our relationships to both the land and one another in a way that transcends the centrality of Columbus and his metaphorical descendants. For the 2009 publication *Art/Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor, and Economics*, an artists' project

organized by Temporary Services, I contributed an essay investigating what I labeled an "activist-based, Indigenous, neo-regionalism." Through this form of regionalism, I began conceptualizing what it would mean to develop regionalisms based in Indigenous ontologies and not on modes put in place by settler colonialism. "Radical Migrations through Anishinaabewaki" further develops the ideas commenced in that essay, ones articulated in my artistic and intellectual practices, and concretized in my everyday life. At the core of these multifarious activities is the rethinking of one's relationship to place, particularly in locations that were once Indigenous spaces (and continue to be so). By reconceptualizing space through practices of alternative cartography, we may begin to de-mystify the history and contemporaneity of our surroundings.

In a similar manner, over the past few years, artists and curators have reconceptualized notions of space within activist-oriented aesthetic projects. Operating from a unique hybrid of activist and avant-garde traditions, one we could name as critical art, these individuals have developed a way to use cartography as an anti-capitalist modality. Alexis Bhagat and Lize Mogel edited *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* in 2008. According to the editors, "The maps and essays in [the] book provoke new understandings of networks and representations of power and its effects on people and places. These new perceptions of the world are the prerequisites of social change." Additionally, curator Nato Thompson's traveling exhibition, *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*, made similar claims about the ways that artists and activists are retheorizing Lefebvrian space and Bakhtinian chronotopes. Evoking the language of geographer Trevor Paglen, Thompson believes that "experimental geography, like it sounds, is more experiment than answer." He continues, "*Experimental Geography* should be considered as a new lens to interpret a growing body of culturally inspired work that deals with human interaction with the land."[1]

Although anti-capitalist in orientation, these new and alternative cartographies are decidedly locked within a structure of settler-coloniality. What was conspicuously absent from each of these otherwise successful projects is any reference to Indigenous chronotopes or cartographies within the matrix of these avant-garde projects. Although Bhagat and Mogel, as well as Thompson, have created interesting and challenging exhibitions, integrating work that pushes our notions of space and place, the structural limitations of settler-colonialism nonetheless restrict the overall potential of these exhibitions. In this way, neither exhibition incorporates contemporary (or historic) Indigenous artists/thinkers/cartographers into their projects. The integration of Indigenous cartography, as an experimental and experiential form, would add an important dimension to these already flourishing projects, particularly given the profound and intimate relationship between

Indigenous ontology and the production of stridently anti-capitalist modes of cartography.[2]

In Mesoamerica, the Nahua and Zapotec people both developed complex map-making systems prior to the arrival of Europeans. In the Andes, the Nazca lines are literally cartographic earthworks etched into the physical land. In the Great Lakes, the Anishinaabeg carved and painted images onto rock, marking the land itself as map. Moreover, members of the Anishinaabe Midewiwin society created countless incised birchbark scrolls that demarcate both natural and spiritual landscapes. My transitory Michif ancestors, particularly as documented in the case of Hyppolite Brissette, tattooed their bodies in a way that related to their expansive travels across North America.[3] The body and land could both become the map, as well as the area mapped. The Hudson's Bay Company documents show that Brissette traversed the expanses of boreal and arctic Canada for more than twenty years. Family history, supported by published histories of the Georgian Bay area of Ontario, record that Brissette's body was covered in tattoos of "curious figures."

Although these are only a few examples of creative and "experimental" approaches to Indigenous cartography and geography, these time-honored, yet avant-garde approaches, are could possibly inform contemporary artists' and activists' projects. While ongoing limitations precipitated by colonial structures retard the full integration of Indigenous ontologies into contemporary artistic analysis, I believe that the time is ripe to hold ourselves accountable and dismantle the remnants of colonialism that structure our daily lives. In this manner, the following serves to correct and redirect our contemporary arts practices, and the activist structures that circulate critical art discourse.

Recently, I have been researching the apparent disconnection within the art world between discourses of contemporaneity and those of indigeneity. While Indigenous artists, activists, curators, intellectuals, and historians struggle to engage with notions of contemporaneity, discourses on the contemporary seem to entirely disavow the indigenous. In "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" a 2009 special issue of the journal *October*, the word "indigenous" only appears once (in regards to the destruction of the Arctic), and the concept is encountered only briefly, when T.J. Demos addresses post-colonial notions of "indigenizing," an application of the term theoretically dissimilar to how most Native peoples evoke the concept of indigeneity. In response to this and other Indigenous absences in the contemporary art world, the following conversations are intended as confrontations and provocations with an ongoing presence that cannot be denied.

As a response to these potentially anti-capitalist developments, yet ongoing colonialisms, this essay is part of a larger project based in the Anishinaabe geography of the Great Lakes, using the seven sacred sites

of the Anishinaabeg migration as points of inquiry. The Anishinaabeg is the name given to the People of the Three Fires (Ojibwe, Potowatomi, and Odawa) and their eastern (Algonquin, Mississaugua, and Nipissing) and western (Saulteaux) cousins. What happens if we map the radical Midwest using aboriginal notions of place? How would this challenge our otherwise settler dominated practices?

According to *Midewinini* Edward Benton-Benai:

Seven prophets came to the Anishinabe. They came at a time when the people were living a full and peaceful life on the North Eastern coast of North America. These prophets left the people with seven predictions of what the future would bring. Each of the prophecies was called a fire and each fire referred to a particular era of time that would come in the future. Thus, the teachings of the seven prophets are now called the "Seven Fires."[4]

These seven prophets corresponded to sites along the Anishinaabeg migration, as well as seven specific teachings:

1. *debwewin* or truth;
2. *gwekwaadiziwi* or honesty;
3. *mnaadenimowin* or respect;
4. *nbwaakaawin* or wisdom;
5. *dbaadendiziwin* or humility;
6. *aakwade'ewin* or bravery;
7. and *zaagidwin* or love.[5]

According to tradition, as written by storyteller Basil Johnston, "the island where the Anishinaubae people were born continued to grow until it became a continent, the Land of the Great Turtle, as North America is commonly known to many North American Indians."[6]

The sacredness and ongoing importance of Anishinaabe place-making, however, must not be ignored. Postcolonial studies allow us to re-focus our vision toward locales outside the European and settler metropoles. Yet, contemporary art, even in the age of global biennials, remains focused on large urban environments where artists work in a singular visual language. For contemporary U.S. artists, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Toronto, and other large urban metropoles are the sites within and from which we so intimately long to work. Personally, I make work for and exhibit in locations where people wouldn't otherwise encounter challenging visual art. Nonetheless, I simultaneously long to be recognized by dominant institutions in these locations. While New York may not be the only center, it is nonetheless one of

the most prominent. As Tsalagi artist Jimmie Durham wrote during the early 1990s, "Here I am in Mexico: the centre of the world and the place where we Cherokees originated. Even so, if I want to make art that challenges, that influences, I must take one of the roads that leads to Rome—currently called New York (even if only to participate in and celebrate its downfall)."[7] By remapping the Midwest from a First Peoples' perspective, we may better attend to the cultural practices transpiring within each of our respective communities, possibly even aiding in Rome's downfall. Projects like the MRCC, among countless other elements of Dark Matter (to borrow a phrase from Gregory Sholette) seek to transcend the fixation on New York, the market orientation of the gallery system, and international art world biennials.

In this spirit, I turn to the voices of five Indigenous activists across the Great Lakes to see what is happening on the ground. What are Native peoples doing locally? How are they developing artistic, intellectual, and activist projects that challenge the centrality of capitalism? The stories told within this essay demonstrate their perspectives by challenging the dominant Western, capitalist, and individualist narratives that are still commonly told. While Native peoples alone may not impede capitalist expansion, the following voices demonstrate that existing discourses and structures are not the only possibilities. Interviews with five indigenous activists and intellectuals are interspersed throughout this book, evoking five of the seven sacred sites of the Anishinaabe migration (Mooniyaang, Wayaanag-gakaabikaa, Detroit, Manidoo-minising, Baawating, Duluth, and Zhaagawaamikong).[8] The stories and perspectives offered differ, as do the manner within which these individuals speak, write, and work. Of course, these unique epistemological perspectives point to the potentiality embodied through contemporary Indigenous intellectual labor. What links their stories, however, is the manner that they each address the ongoing and fluid nature of contemporary Indigenous art, activism, sovereignty, and being in the world.