

The Repeating Island of Indigenous Death

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Introduction

I want to start by saying that it is significant that indigenous people die—significant meaning irreducibly complex and sometimes contradictory. With this in mind, I will pursue the always-deferred moment of Honduran indigenous activist Berta Cáceres’s death, who was murdered in her home a little before midnight on March 2, 2016. Rippling with confusion, the death of Cáceres functions unstably across multiple sociopolitical registers; for many, she signifies a living, indigenous movement for rights to self-determination, while for others, her death formed a point of access to power.¹ Looking at indigenous death as an unstable political event enlarges the system of reference and prevents attempts to understand death merely as a graspable moment—rather, death moves and flitters, and must be roped into a relational network with other deaths that look and function similarly. Simply, death lives, as it always does, never really ending, never coincident with a heartbeat’s cessation. This is what Christina Sharpe calls the connection between “liveliness and deathliness” (“Black”).² As with protesters who took to the streets in response to her murder while wearing masks of her face, Berta Cáceres is at once also Metacomet, Spotted Elk, Geronimo, and other indigenous people across time, living and dead, who stand and fall and stand again.³

Put another way, it’s important to bear in mind that death is not discrete or isolated. Rather, it jumps and repeats, similarly to Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s conception of the “repeating island.” Arguing for a reading of the Caribbean as a “meta-archipelago,” Rojo suggests that the plantation system developed during the Atlantic slave trade (referred to by Rojo as a Deleuzian “machine”) ramified endlessly throughout North and South America, creating cultural and

economic formations that are fundamentally similar, yet visibly divergent. Courting chaos math to make his point, Rojo eschews a center-periphery binary for the constant rippling of material effects from one island to the next. “If someone needed a visual explanation,” Rojo offers, “I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe’s firmament, that sketches in an ‘other’ shape that keeps changing” (Benítez-Rojo 4). In this model of the Caribbean meta-archipelago, the Antilles are an island bridge that connects North and South America, taking the islands and continents situated therein as themselves all islands, no longer assuming a continental superiority.

Rojo’s model of the meta-archipelago is useful for understanding the repetitions of indigenous death throughout North and South America. In addition to Rojo’s understanding of the Antilles as an island bridge, I argue that indigenous death itself connects the Northern and Southern continents; that Berta Cáceres is Lenca in Honduras allows this claim. Rojo’s work also coincides with various theoretical work in indigenous and queer thought, and for that reason, will be situated alongside recent contributions by Brian Burkhart, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Mark Rifkin, and Andrea Smith. More specifically for the purposes of this essay, without losing the specificity of differing indigenous peoples, I argue that death and dispossession work to elucidate an unstable logic undergirding progress (broadly conceived) in the United States, whether it is the physical progress of the nineteenth-century frontier (which necessarily passed through the bodies of indigenous people), or the “progressivism” of Hillary Clinton (which passed through the body of Berta Cáceres).⁴ I will argue that focusing on indigenous death opens onto a differing mode of historical perception outside of more linear, nationalistic, and discrete narratives, a mode of perception that understands and acknowledges extractivist capitalism for what it is.

On the Mystery and Multiplicity of Indigenous Death and Being

Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores was murdered in her home on March 2, 2016. She was with her *compañero*, Gustavo Castro, a Chiapan indigenous environmental activist, who was working with her organization, the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). No one knows for certain how many gunmen there were, but they broke down the door and shot both activists just before midnight. Berta Cáceres died in the arms of her *compañero* the morning after the attack; Gustavo Castro himself survived. In the aftermath of her death, it has become clear that Cáceres’s death was far from accidental or incidental; plans for her murder probably

date back as far as 2015, due to Cáceres's regular opposition to the hydroelectric dam company, Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA), a company with veritable ties to the state of Honduras (GAIPE 4). And as other details surrounding her death become clearer, it is her death itself that remains shrouded in mystery. How many armed men were needed to murder two environmental activists? It might have been two gunmen; some reports suggest as many as eleven (Watts). The numbers here are unruly; they tend to flicker and move, ultimately ungraspable. And when we think of the gap between the numbers two and eleven, we confront the limits of bare facts to elucidate death as an object of study.

What is clear about that night is that two indigenous activists were attacked. Not one, but two. Even in a directed assassination attempt, it never could've been one, because indigenous death is multiple, ongoing, and temporally disruptive. Cáceres's death in the arms of her *compañero* reveals that indigenous death never ends indigenous life, and that survival is likewise never singular. As Karen Spring notes, quoting signs used to protest Cáceres's death, "Berta Cáceres did not die. She multiplied." It's important to start here before continuing the narrative of Cáceres's life: on the one hand, we have the mysterious, fluctuating number of gunmen and, on the other, we have the clarity of two indigenous victims. The attempted murder of two enables the lives of an unquantifiable number of gunmen. This inverse relation shapes much of the history of the treatment of indigenous people in North and South America, dating as far back as the sixteenth century. Careful not to necessitate or instrumentalize a preexisting violence, indigenous death is advanced here as an object of study that can only be gotten at *chaotically*, that is to say, according to its repetitions. Just as the Antilles connect North and South America, so does indigenous death, undoing a nationalist frame of study and instead suggesting an archipelagic study, in which the repeating temporal instances of indigenous death are linked according to patterns, or processes, inherent to Western "progress." Proceeding from the partial mystery of Berta Cáceres's death allows us access to a broader, phenomenal view of indigenous death across the world.

With an emphasis on repetition and the always-multiple death of indigenous people, we necessarily approach what Andrea Smith (alongside David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz) refers to as "subjectless critique."⁵ This is a form of critique inaugurated in queer theory that proceeds without a "fixed political referent," and in the context of indigenous studies, is deployed as a way of critically distancing work from the normativizing discourse of colonialism, which always already excludes indigenous people. "Consequently, Native studies [when premised on the acquisition of political subjecthood] often rests on a Native subject awaiting humanity. In other

words, if people simply understood Native peoples better, Natives would then become fully human” (Smith 42).⁶ Berta Cáceres’s death alongside her *compañero* already undoes any politics premised on the individual acquisition of rights. Rather, starting from the demand for self-determination, Cáceres’s death, as something shared with Gustavo Castro, demonstrates the need for a political and ontological discourse willing to incorporate multiplicity when considering questions of survival.

This deserves examination from both spatial and temporal angles of approach, both of which are disrupted as stable registers in the instance of Cáceres’s death. From the perspective of metric space, it is noteworthy that Castro is from Chiapas, Mexico, not Honduras. In this collapse of geopolitical distance, Cáceres’s death becomes a transnationally shared event. This is usefully explored through the work of Brian Burkhart who, via Enrique Dussel, attends to a self-avowedly local, indigenous ontology that functions apart from the political logic of coloniality (Burkhart).⁷ Through his claim that “*locality is a metaphysical fact*,” Burkhart shifts the basis of subject-formation from a subject/object binary and instead opts for “locality,” which refers both to the “manifestation of being, knowing, and meaning out of the land,” as well as “the manifestation of the being of the land itself” (Burkhart 6). To clarify, this means that all subject-formation emerges from experiences of a particular locality, just as that locality is also shaped simultaneously by our experiences within it. Far from dismantling the transnational proposition that opens this paragraph, locality is understood here as a shared ontological basis that develops coextensively with all moving parts in a given locality; for that reason, locality is not fixed, but always in synchronous flux. In fact, as will be seen later, it is only when a particular political subject attempts to violently laminate a political order onto a foreign locality that trouble arises.

Enrique Dussel’s own work is rooted in the mid-sixteenth-century Valladolid debate, in which the ethical treatment of indigenous people in the Americas was debated by philosopher Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bishop of Chiapas, Bartolomé de Las Casas. Sepúlveda “argue[d] that the European culture grants the blessing of civilization for the fundamentally backward (*turditatum*) Indians who are not merely heathen but backwards or barbarian in their fundamental state of being” (Burkhart 3). Access to ontological ground is thus formulated on the basis of a European/non-European binary that situates the subject-position at an impossible distance from the object-position. The formulation maintains itself by way of its own assertion—a rational explanation for the backward position of the indigenous other is never given. Instead, the lack of a Christian God becomes as sufficient an explanation as any.

Sepúlveda’s argument adheres to a strict hierarchy that opposes perceived, abstract values of superiority and inferiority, which is also mapped on to other

conceptual oppositions, such as master and slave, soul and body, good and evil, and so on (Todorov 153). Las Casas, the accepted winner of the debate (though no official victor was declared), argued instead along the lines of an indiscriminate Christian equality, which proceeds from the possibility of all men becoming Christian. Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of this debate highlights the more complicated problems of Las Casas's argument, precisely because his proposition of equality assumes the absolute value (and inevitability) of the acquisition of Christian salvation. For this reason, Las Casas perceives indigenous peoples as teleologically behind the Spanish in terms of development, propping himself up as the goal toward which natives must lurch. "The postulate of equality," Todorov explains, "involves the assertion of identity" formulated on a lip service to difference, which is then collapsed by acknowledging that indigenous peoples are actually not different at all, but instead backward and, therefore, as of yet unbelieving (166–67). The subject position is still situated at an impossible distance from the indigenous position, as Las Casas perceives the Spanish as the finish line. Within a teleological schema, however, the finish line is no sooner met than it moves forward again.

In the Americas (regardless of the invoked ideal of a self-contradictory equality), perpetually faced with its own dissolution, the European subject maintains its ontological status by enacting violence on the indigenous population. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, alongside Sylvia Wynter, furthers this notion by suggesting that indigenous people occupied an "exceptional" place in war as a result of the Valladolid debate. Stripped of their humanness, treatment of the indigenous population no longer adhered to "the code of ethics that regulated behavior among the subjects of the crown in their kingdom" (247). In this sense, "Columbus's redefinition of the purpose of land as being one *for us*, whereby *for us* meant *for us* who belong to the realm of Man vis-à-vis those outside the human oecumene," plunges the so-called New World into an exceptional space, justifying previously reprehensible behavior, such as slavery (246–47).⁸ Maldonado-Torres describes this as the "non-ethics of war" that came to characterize and legitimize violent treatment of indigenous people. Burkhart's "locality" is an attempt to counter the exceptional prescription of Valladolid, as coloniality itself operates on the basis that locality is a metaphysical fact, demonstrated by its continual attempt to parcel out and abstract swaths of land. "A remainder of the being of the land as locality always exists in contrast to the coloniality of land itself as a delocalized abstraction, as mere land" (Burkhart 6). A pipeline being laid across indigenous land is tragic due to the (re)staging of this tension, that is to say, the violent resistance of the land to colonization, of which some part always remains uncolonized.

From a spatial perspective, as the excursion into Burkhart and Maldonado-Torres demonstrates, the European political subject doesn't hold because

it attempts to abstract a universal quality of subjecthood from its locality, violently enforcing it in the distant, geosocial space of the Americas. The spatial problem plaguing the European subject, however, is also a temporal problem. Mark Rifkin explains that contemporary non-native accounts of political equality, “[m]ore than offering invidious portraits of Indians as backward and disappearing,” as we saw with Valladolid, “non-native accounts, governmental and popular, treat the space of the United States as a given in which to set the unfolding of events, and in this way the political union functions as something of an *atemporal* container for the occurrences, movements, conjunctures, periodicities, and pulsations of history” (1; emphasis added). Tied to the spatial logic of coloniality, the understanding of geosocial and geopolitical space as a container allows for the troublesome proliferation of the same abstract ideals of subjecthood and equality that Andrea Smith argues against. When taking seriously the notion of multiplication as a response to the death of Berta Cáceres, time is introduced as a powerful tool for (and guarantee of) radical change. Tied to this proposition is the possibility of a different spatiotemporal logic that takes indigenous struggle throughout Western history together as simultaneous, synchronous, and yet always changing.

Recasting the spatial logics of colonialism in the terms of multiplicity, then, also means developing a *chaotic* sense of time. This is precisely what Antonio Benítez-Rojo offers us in his concept of a “repeating island.” Looking toward the chaotic in his work on the Caribbean, Rojo specifically invokes the field of chaos math as a productive lens through which to view the repeating sociopolitical ramifications of the British and French slave trade. Chaos is figured in his work as a model to explain the way things occurring in one place can have effects across vast, metric distances. Starting with the plantation, Rojo argues that it is this violent system that allowed globalized capitalism to develop, creating, among other things, “mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism . . . African underdevelopment . . . [and] Caribbean population” (9). The socioeconomic system of capitalism is also itself chaotic in the sense that it repeats with a difference in all these geographically distinct places, united only in its multiple, ongoing processes of exploitation.

According to mathematician Geoff Boeing, “Chaos theory is a branch of mathematics that deals with nonlinear dynamical systems” (1). “Systems” here refers to a set of relationships working together to form some kind of whole, a “whole [that] becomes something greater than the mere sum of its individual parts” (1). Put another way by the developer of chaos theory, Ed Lorenz: “Chaos: When the present determines the future, but the approximate present does not approximately determine the future” (qtd. in Danforth). Causality is disrupted in its lineal representation of historical movement: though a chaotic system might begin simply “with very few interacting parts,” this

system changes over time (hence “dynamical”), and resultantly “can produce wildly unpredictable, divergent and fractal . . . behavior” (Boeing 1). Rojo is interested in this kind of mathematical inquiry for its inclusion of difference as a constitutive element of an interconnected system. The convergence of differing cultural modes during the slave trade produced an echoing exploitative system at the same time that it produced a creolized resilience, an ancient cultural remainder that cannot be absolutely cannibalized by the encroachment (and violent imposition) of other social, cultural, political, and economic modes. “When a people’s culture conserves ancient dynamics that play ‘in a certain kind of way,’ these resist being displaced by external territorializing forms and they propose to coexist with them through syncretic processes” (Benítez-Rojo 20). Exemplary of this “old and powerful” form of cultural resilience, Rojo examines the seventeenth-century interest in the *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre*, a “supersyncretic” Marian statue that generated an image cult in El Cobre, Cuba, containing a “fusion of the cults of Atabey (Taino), Oshun (Yoruba), and Our Lady, constituting also an early appearance of the creoles’ integrationist desire” (52). For Rojo, the statue and its image cult are a mythologization of the racial and cultural convergence of the Caribbean plantation, as well as the desire of a transcendent, unified society of difference.

While Rojo argues this excessive, uncolonized remainder exists in the creolized culture created by the slave trade, Burkhart materially locates this excessive remainder in the locality of the land. Indigenous death murmurs at the center of these convergent theories, with death figured here as the space that dissolves the European subject while also being enacted by the European subject through an equation of indigeneity and death. The result is that death occurs in excess of colonial, rational thought. As the predetermination of indigenous people as savage inextricably binds death to indigeneity in the colonial imagination, it is therefore impossible to study death rationally, as something clear, distinct, or locatable.⁹ Rather, indigenous death is the precondition of Western subjectivity at the same time that it is an excessive resistance to that subjectivity; death is situated as the perpetual threat of the dissolution of Western subjectivity as a whole. This explains the arithmetical conundrum at the heart of Cáceres’s death: the unquantifiable gunmen ironically desubjectified by the excessive naming of Cáceres, thus multiplying her existence. But Castro was there as well, demonstrating the multiplicity of indigenous death itself. At once islandic and interconnected, the archipelago of indigenous death or, the repeating island of indigenous death, exists everywhere in ongoing systems of coloniality that attempt to de-localize land for economic purposes.

Protesters who took to the streets on March 2, 2017, one year after Cáceres’s murder, demonstrated this multiplicity. Bedecked in masks of the

fallen environmental activist, the assertion of indigenous identity revealed itself in an interesting inversion of Las Casas's own argument regarding equality and difference. This image stages unity within difference—an excessive and mad demonstration of hundreds of the same indigenous person, so that the protesters demonstrate exaggerated solidarity, using the tragic “failure” of Cáceres's life as a radical and paradoxical continuation of her environmental work (“Honduras Remembers”). The masks also offer cover to the protesters; by taking on Cáceres's likeness, the masks protect the specific identities of the protesters at the same time they offer the possibility that anyone could be under the mask, including you, including me. Moving from this image of protesters masked as Cáceres, it is easy to imagine the type of interconnectivity of indigenous death across time and space that I am arguing for. As Cáceres's friend, María Santos Domínguez asserts, ““They murdered Berta and they thought that, with her dead, we would not continue—but we showed them we can”” (qtd. in Ford).

The excess of colonial endeavor leaves us with geographically and temporally dispersed instances of indigenous death that don't clearly interweave. Turning between the archipelagic and indigeneity allows for us to shift Rojo's cultural focus to a materially inflected system of indigenous death that is repetitious yet distinct, connecting North and South America according to the preconditioning of indigenous death for progress. Though this explains a theoretical connection between the archipelagic and indigeneity, however, the connection is made more concrete when understanding the transition that took place in Honduras during the nineteenth-century dissolution of the slave trade and the rise of the banana industry. As historian John Soluri clarifies, the North Coast of Honduras functioned as “a dividing line of sorts between Mayan and Xicaque indigenous groups.” “By the late 1800s,” however, after the decline in indigenous population in light of European and African contact, “all that remained of the region's pre-Columbian settlements were the ceramic artifacts that export banana growers frequently unearthed when planting their farms” (7). From this we can glean a sedimentary view of the histories of the slave trade and indigenous death, in which striations of environmental effect can be read in such a way that binds the plantation to pre-Columbian dispossession. It is also important to bear in mind that “[t]he abolition of slavery in Jamaica and elsewhere in the British Caribbean prompted both former slaveholders and ex-slaves to migrate to the Bay Islands,” a kind of Honduran archipelago just off the coast of the country's continental land (19). Furthermore, because the banana industry was headed by U.S.-based companies, such as United Fruit, this history contains within it a convergence, or further sedimentation, of the histories of the United States, indigenous dispossession, and the Caribbean slave trade itself. While the theoretical connection of Burkhart's indig-

enous ontology and Rojo's archipelagic chaos transcends the specificity of this materially historic connection, the history of the banana industry usefully allows for this paper to straddle a line between the metaregister of a repeating island of indigenous death and the history of the specific, geopolitical space of Honduras. In turning toward the fuller narrative surrounding the death of Berta Cáceres, I hope to clarify further the application of the archipelago of indigenous death in an attempt to develop a better understanding of how indigenous death leaps across national boundaries.

Berta Cáceres and Hillary Clinton, a Tale of Two Women; or, Death for “Progress”

Prior to her murder, Berta Cáceres had worn a target on her back for at least six years: her opposition to DESA was primarily aimed at the company's attempts to build hydroelectric dams on Lenca land, for which the company was created. Cáceres, herself Lenca, had been fighting the company's Agua Zarca hydro project since 2006. As a student in 1993, she helped to found COPINH, through which this opposition was largely organized. In 2015, Cáceres was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize, as her efforts had persuaded two major financial backers of the dam project—including the World Bank's lending arm—to back out (Blitzer). As a result of similar conflicts, it is important to note that in Honduras, between 2010 and 2014, 101 environmental activists have been killed, making it “the most dangerous country per capita to be an environmental activist” (“How Many More?”).¹⁰ Going into hiding in 2013, Cáceres spoke to this violence, as three other activists had already been killed for opposing the dam project (Blitzer). ““They follow me,”” she said. ““They threaten to kill me, to kidnap me; they threaten my family. That is what we face”” (qtd. in Blitzer).

What enabled the dangerous surveillance of Cáceres and others was a 2009 military coup d'état that ousted democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya from office, installing Roberto Micheletti in his place. DESA received its dam contracts from the coup government. Berta Cáceres's death is, at least partially, explained by this series of events, a result of a transition of power from a left-leaning government to a reactionary regime. This transition's violent results also implicate the United States in a history of state corruption, a connection that exceeds the realm of conjecture. For instance, court documents reveal that of the eight men arrested for Cáceres's murder in 2017, two received military training in Fort Benning, Georgia, at the infamous School of the Americas (now euphemistically called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), known for its irregularly high output of Latin

American dictators.¹¹ Of the five civilians arrested for Cáceres's murder, one is named Sergio Rodríguez, manager of the Agua Zarca dam project. Beyond this, DESA is run by two former government officials, as its president is Roberto David Castillo Mejía and its secretary is Roberto Pacheco Reyes. Mejía was once a military intelligence officer while Reyes was a justice minister. The murderers' ties to state military renders U.S. involvement virtually undeniable: the United States approved \$17 million of military aid in 2016 alone, smaller than both 2017's \$19 million and 2015's \$22 million ("Security Aid Pivot Table"). According to a former Honduran soldier, Berta Cáceres's name even appeared on a hitlist that was distributed to the Inter-institutional Security Force, trained by U.S. marines and FBI agents ("Berta Cáceres's name").

Amidst this web of competing politics and high-profile military corruption is Cáceres's actual death, a moment and yet not a moment, not even a singular event. Rather, as the anti-environmentalist trajectory above shows, Cáceres's murder is a moment among many, all interwoven within a broader sociopolitical and historical network, evidenced by the sheer number of activists (largely peasants) who have been killed, including a man named Juan Galindo (who appeared on the hit list alongside Cáceres) ("Berta Cáceres's name"). Instead of a singular event, we have what Christina Sharpe refers to as a "singularity": "a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances" (*In the Wake*).¹² Specifically used to describe the climate of antiblack racism in the United States, Sharpe's description can also work to elucidate the repetitions of indigenous death and the resultant atmosphere. Calling to mind the mathematical discourse of chaos, this "climate," as it is invoked here, can only be predicted approximately, without any certain grasp of when or where a similar event might occur—we can only know when and where it might happen, perhaps because of this or that. This is in keeping with Geoff Boeing's characterization of Ed Lorenz's discovery of chaos in math when Boeing explains, "[Lorenz] found that nearly indistinguishable initial conditions could produce completely divergent outcomes, rendering weather prediction impossible beyond a time horizon of about a fortnight" (2). With the event of Cáceres's death plugged into this chaotic definition of a singularity, the representational fallout of her murder has been predictably unstable. It is impossible to assign her death a singular cause or singular outcome—impossible even to assign a singular afterlife. Instead, Cáceres's death is a part of a socioeconomic "climate" of anti-environmentalism and anti-indigeneity. Taking this instability as our cue, I still think it is possible to develop a cogent political understanding of her death.

In a simplified form for the purposes of this essay, we can clarify a connection between two narratives in light of Cáceres's murder. On the one hand, organizations like COPINH and the newly formed Justice for Berta move-

ment continue to fight agribusinesses and energy companies from encroaching upon indigenous land (“Demands”). On the other (bloodier) hand, however, we find the uneasy rise of Hillary Clinton in the midst of all this, as she served as Secretary of State in 2009, and refused to refer to the Honduran coup as a coup, with the result that nonhumanitarian (military) aid continued to be provided by the United States, allowing the coup government to flourish (Johnson).¹³ Cáceres’s death flickers somewhere within the margins of these two narratives. The event adheres to no easy representation precisely because of this paradox: these opposed narratives preclude any causality. Instead, it is necessary to examine the process of indigenous death, especially as it repeats throughout the history of the United States.

Before engaging in a historical comparative study of this process, however, it may be helpful to frame my method of approach. In the previous section, the colonial origin of the discourse of ontology in Valladolid was briefly examined in order to discuss Burkhart’s attempt at outlining indigenous ontology, in which “locality” was mobilized to explain the movements of coloniality and its obsession with land acquisition. While the United States forms a specific geopolitical area of study here, it is important to bear in mind its implication in a longer history of indigenous dispossession, which takes the movements of colonialism throughout North and South America together, despite being enacted by different colonial powers. From the vantage point of the United States frontier in the nineteenth century, however, the process of indigenous dispossession clarifies, especially in relation to Berta Cáceres’s death. With this in mind, I’d like to briefly look at nineteenth-century indigenous dispossession in the United States alongside and against Berta Cáceres’s murder. In order to do so, I take two specific events as my focus, the first of which is an “Indian Council” at Walla Walla, Washington, in 1855, during which several indigenous groups lost their land. Secondly, I will reexamine Berta Cáceres’s death in light of Hillary Clinton’s position as the “progressive” candidate during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The similarities between the two events will work to elucidate further the climate of anti-indigeneity that prevails throughout North and South America, and the excessive resistance to this climate that resides in continued efforts to resist agribusiness and state corruption in Cáceres’s name.

So let’s trek back to 1855, when a young lieutenant named Lawrence Kip, formerly a West Point student, trailed an “Escort from the 4th infantry” of the U.S. army throughout the Pacific Northwest (Kip). During a brief stay at an army outpost in The Dalles, Oregon, Kip met the First Governor of Washington Territory, Isaac Ingalls Stevens, who invited him to tag along to the valley of Walla Walla, where Stevens would be holding a Grand Council with various indigenous groups who called the surrounding area home. “The

object of this Council was,” Kip notes in his journal, “therefore, to propose to [the indigenous groups in the area] the purchase of their territory—a proposition which it was expected, (as it afterwards proved,) would be received by some tribes with violent opposition.” Kip’s aim in keeping a journal of his experiences in the Northwest was to detail “Army life on the frontiers.” That Kip invokes the frontier here as his object of study situates him at the edge of the possessed country at the time—described in his journal is one of many processes of dispossession, a process that dictated the further development of the United States and the incremental advance of the frontier line. Kip’s journal is, in this sense, a narrative of physical progress.

At the core of Kip’s journal (and of my interest in his journal) is a partial transcription of the negotiation at the Grand Council in Walla Walla between government officials and approximately eight indigenous groups, though Kip only names five: the Nez Perce (Niimíípu), the Walla Walla, the Cayuse (Lik-siyu), the Umatilla, and the Yakama. Much of the disagreement as Kip transcribes it can be attributed to differing ecological orientations, in which the indigenous spokespeople describe the land as an extension of their body, while the government officials conceive of land as a disposable, separate backdrop to their physical mobility. For instance, Owhi, the Umatilla chief, asks the Council, “Shall I steal this land to sell it? . . . Shall I give the land which is a part of my body and leave myself poor and destitute?” (qtd. in Kip). This view of land as an extension of the body prevents many of the indigenous people present at the Council from understanding what is being offered and what is being exchanged, as this would require a temporal and spatial abstraction from their land. Land is, rather, presented here as being continuous with the indigenous people who call it home. As Young Chief, chief of the Cayuses, points out, “The Indians are blind. This is the reason we do not see the country well. . . . I do not see the offer you have made to us yet. If I had the money in my hand I should see. I am, as it were, blind” (qtd. in Kip). In response, the Indian Agent present at the Council, General Palmer, offers his own question: “Young Chief says, he does not know what we propose to him. . . . Can we bring these saw mills and these grist mills on our back to show these people? Can we bring these blacksmith shops, these wagons and tents on our backs to show them at this time? . . . It takes time to do these things” (qtd. in Kip). Palmer describes briefly here the process of industrialization intended for the land they would receive from the indigenous people present. This requires an abstraction that understands indigenous dispossession as a precondition for physical progress.

The indigenous people at the Council are “blind” due to the belated nature of the offer being made to them. Immediate to the indigenous people was their survival, a survival threatened by dispossession, which would mean death

for many of the people present. General Palmer, Lawrence Kip, Governor Stevens, and other government officials at the Council proceeded in spite of all this. The only sympathy we as readers get is when Kip notes, “All but the Nez Percés were evidently disinclined to the treaty, and it was melancholy to see their reluctance to abandon the old hunting grounds of their fathers and their impotent struggles against the overpowering influence of the whites.” Settlement on the frontier takes on the character of a bulldozer, with indigenous people pushed off their land regardless of the threat to their survival. It is rather telling that, after all, this treaty led to the Yakima War, which went on from 1855 until 1858, as the treaty signed at Walla Walla went unratified for some time by the Senate, leaving reservation lands open to white settlement until ratification (Wilma). Death and dispossession appear, as they always do, hand in hand, a precondition to the bulldozing movement of U.S. settlement.

This pattern also applies to the contemporary context of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in 2016. Prior to this campaign, as was mentioned, Clinton served as Secretary of State during the Honduran coup. Despite a resounding global condemnation of the coup, the United States held out, as Clinton didn’t want to suspend military aid to the country during its crisis. Clinton claims that the impetus behind this was in part due to her opposition to Manuel Zelaya, who she feared becoming “another Chavez or Castro” (Lakhani “Did Hillary Clinton”). The violence that ensued as a result of the coup—and the brutal police and military crackdown—is not the subject of this essay, but should also be noted, as Clinton sat back playing political chess with Honduras while people were dying. Of more immediate interest here is the mobilization of the term “progressive” to describe Clinton’s candidacy, especially in light of her role in Honduras (vanden Heuvel).¹⁴

Berta Cáceres would still be alive were it not for Clinton’s inaction, as her death was perpetrated by people involved not only with DESA, but with the coup government as well. The recently published investigation of her death by GAIPE explains this connection, from which I quote at length:

Despite the secrecy of the Public Prosecutor’s investigation, GAIPE has been able to establish the participation of executives, managers and employees of DESA, of private security personnel hired by the company, of state agents and parallel structures to State security forces in crimes committed before, during and after March 2, 2016, the day of the assassination.

In spite of this government's illegal rise to power and its ensuing terror, Hillary Clinton chose to do nothing, which in this case allowed the continuation of military aid to the very government responsible for this terror. Furthermore, Clinton justified this choice by invoking the figures of Cesar Chavez and Fidel Castro, definitively casting herself against laborers of color throughout North and South America. The unquantifiable number of gunmen present at Cáceres's death might as well have been wearing masks of Clinton's face, enabled and made safe by a U.S. imperialism that literally knows no bounds. As Cáceres herself is a part of a larger history of indigenous resistance, Clinton is also a recent manifestation of a broader history of this imperialism.

Thinking of Walla Walla and Clinton together, despite the historical distance between the two events, it is interesting to question why our access to a so-called progressivism must still occur through the bodies of indigenous people. In this sense, "progress" is understood as a twofold term, in its literal and figurative dimensions: 1) there is the literal progress of U.S. development in 1855; and 2) Hillary Clinton's progressivism refers to a set of voting records that accord to an overarching progressive commitment to certain issues, such as health care and immigration. In the second, figurative sense, progressivism is a liberal-humanist embrace of society reform. When considered within the context of Berta Cáceres's murder, the term is warped from its supposed inclusivity to a violent exclusivity, similar to the development of the human subject in Valladolid as always-already European, that is to say, not savage and therefore not indigenous. Clinton's progressivism remains mired in the exclusivity of Valladolid, a humanism that recognizes and assumes certain people as expendable, not even human. Berta Cáceres's murder is also linked to her continued opposition to dispossessive state tactics to establish dams on indigenous land. Eschewing discrete historical and geographical delimitation in favor of an archipelagic emphasis on chaotic processes that look and act similarly allows us to forge a connection between Walla Walla in 1855 and Hillary Clinton in 2016. This kind of connection requires nonlinear investigation to make itself clear, instead collapsing geographical and temporal distance. North and South America, 1855 and 2016, fold atop each other with Rojo's representation of chaos math.

Acknowledging the mystery of Cáceres's murder undoes an Enlightenment ideal of facts speaking for themselves, to paraphrase Stephen Duncombe.¹⁵ Instead, it is necessary to speculate on connections within and without of the events' context simultaneously. Put another way, the names of everyone involved in Cáceres's murder are still unclear, in spite of the eight men who have been arrested. It may be impossible to understand the story in its entirety, so that a part of it will always vacillate between the figures of two and eleven. And as Cáceres's death exceeds the mere facts of its

occurrence, it is also important to chart the way her death lives, not only in relation to past events, such as those in 1855, but also in the continuation of her work. COPINH still resists the Agua Zarca dam, and more international funders of the project backed out in June of 2017 (Lakhani “Backers”). Furthermore, the Justice for Berta Web site not only aggregates relevant news developments (recent coverage is primarily in reference to the 2017 Honduran general election), but it also provides forms and links toward possible action that could be taken in order to aid Honduras, including congresspersons’ names and prewritten letters to Agua Zarca dam funders and related company CEOs.¹⁶ These continued efforts seek to inhabit the excess of a world outside and within the preexisting colonial order by aligning themselves with the life and work of Berta Cáceres herself. In a statement condemning the continued presidency of Juan Orlando Hernandez in light of the 2017 election, COPINH signs off, asserting, “With the ancestral force of Berta, Lempira Mota, Iselaca y Etempia, we raise our voices full of life, justice, liberty, dignity and peace” (“COPINH Calls to Respect”). This phrase recognizes the attempt to inhabit a world in excess of colonial domination, both spatially and temporally.

Conclusion

To end how I began, the fact of indigenous death is significant—so significant, and so painfully repeated, that it eludes our grasp at all times. This essay was an attempt to pursue an always-deferred moment of indigenous death and to build a cogent political engagement in spite of an endlessly partialized viewpoint. Understanding indigenous death according to multiplicity and spatiotemporal disruption (and therefore, according to a kind of life), I have deliberately situated my argument within the mystery of Cáceres’s death itself, taking difference as a constitutive element of the unity of a repeating island of indigenous death. Quite frankly, Berta Cáceres’s death was needless and avoidable, and it is important to parse out the differing representative strands tangled around her murder in order to better understand how and why she died. This process is as unstable and chaotic as the competing narratives leading up to her death, never smoothed out into a strictly causal, linear claim. Instead, it is necessary to collapse geopolitical distances and enter into an archipelagic chaos that conceives of the spaces between as ebbs and flows, as processes and patterns.

Attached to an impossibly large historical trajectory, Cáceres’s death reveals the nonhuman status persistently prescribed to indigenous people within our contemporary political climate; Hillary Clinton’s progressivism is built on a humanist tradition exclusive to white “Europeans.” In spite of this, there

remains an uncolonizable afterlife of death, an excess that is being inhabited by COPINH and Justice for Berta. Careful not to minimize or instrumentalize the tragedy of indigenous death, we have to remember that none of this changes the fact that Berta Cáceres is dead. Instead, it's her death that lives, and the events leading up to her death. Our world is constituted by this death and the others that preceded it. We would do well to remember how and why in order not to capitulate to the fear of representational instability. The excessive, the uncolonizable, the remainder, these are all differing responses to the same dilemma: how do we live with death? By situating our approach to politics in the realm of multiplicity, by taking death for what it is, and by repeating the names of those who died again and again: Berta Cáceres, Metacomet, Spotted Elk, Geronimo, Owhi, Young Chief . . .

Notes

1. For the continuation of Cáceres's activism, see "Demands." For a condensed view of Hillary Clinton's role in the 2009 Honduras coup that led to Cáceres's murder, see Zunes.
2. Here Sharpe is referring to a perceived, definite line between life and death that assumes the separation of the two as distinct, existential states. Taking this as my cue, this essay's investigation of Berta Cáceres understands life and death as cohesive.
3. See Knight.
4. See Vanden Heuvel.
5. See also David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, introduction to "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?"
6. See also da Silva.
7. Coloniality here refers to the persistent axis of power upon which colonialism was built, outliving the socioeconomic system of colonialism itself. Anibal Quijano developed this concept, explaining, "One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimension of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was establish. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality" (533).
8. See also Wynter 5–57.
9. This is not, however, meant to ignore the way in which death is utilized colonially as a form of political control. For an extensive overview of the necropolitical tactics of neocolonialism, see Mbembe 11–40.

10. This number has since grown to over 120. See “Honduras: The Deadliest Country in the World for Environmental Activism.”
11. For evidence of Berta Cáceres’s murderers being trained in the United States, see Lakhani, “Berta Cáceres Court Documents.” For a brief overview of the troubled history of the School of the Americas, see “School of the Dictators.”
12. The way “event” is being mobilized in this essay takes its cue equally from Christina Sharpe as well as Mikhail Bakhtin. As Bakhtin argues of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s work, “*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in face the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels.* What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world,* combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (6). “Event” in this context refers to a way of “co-existing,” according to Caryl Emerson’s footnote. This means that the “unity of the event” is a unity of difference, calling to mind Rojo’s understanding of capitalism and cultural excess as chaotic systems, or machines. Difference is a constitutive element of the unity, so that multiple competing elements are uncollapsible into each other. Representational instability is an easy extension of this idea—the multiple “consciousnesses” that Bakhtin refers to in the event means that no single voice is representationally dominant. All are equally constitutive. In conjunction with Sharpe’s singularity, the event as being comprised of a specific climate of anti-blackness or anti-indigeneity causes chaotic repetitions of itself over space and time, causally disconnected while always-already a part of the same inter-differential unity.
13. See also Zunes.
14. See also Cohn and “US Election.”
15. “How did the Democrats capitalize on their opponents’ popular weakness? With meek statements about proper judicial process and respect for expert medical opinion—all the inspiration of a Sergeant Friday: ‘Just the facts, ma’am. No need to get excited.’ This was not merely a case of political ineptitude; it was the manifestation of an Enlightenment-era faith that facts are more powerful than fantasies” (Duncombe 6).
16. See “Take Action.”

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