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In the last decades, we have become used to understanding North and South America as two different worlds. This essay stitches our continent back together – as a single entity – by looking on both hemispheres at instruments of settler colonialism, in particular borders and grids, either by European colonizers or by already established American nation-states. Thus, if colonialism is a violent act of bordering, of transforming indigenous lands into registered, taxable properties, then one of the keys to decolonizing, they suggest, might be to rethink the tools and arguments behind the creations of different kinds of borders.
Mapa de 1601 del cronista, historiador y escritor español Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas que muestra el meridiano establecido en virtud del Tratado de Tordesillas de 1494.

Fuente: The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries Special Collections
At the Border

The colonial genealogy of the contemporary nation-state border frames any politics of its opening. Borders are opened when they are approached, conceptually and practically, as ambivalent, porous, fluid, and negotiated. At the same time, borders, whether closed or opened, are also historical artifacts of a colonial episteme. Neglecting the colonial genealogy of the border renders border work of all sorts as a deferral of the work of decolonization.

The planet is bordered because it was bordered by colonialism. Étienne Balibar (2002:79) has suggested the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas as one of the key moments in the emergence of this globalizing regime of bordering. This treaty, between the Portuguese and Castilian Empires, divided the Atlantic at a meridian line 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands into possessions of each empire. In its initial formulation, the length of this meridian was not specified. As Spanish and Portuguese explorers increasingly encountered ‘new’ parts of the ‘New World,’ however, the meridian came to be extended across the planet, dividing it into hemispheres, each belonging to one of the treaty’s two imperial signatories.

As a practice of seizing land from Indigenous peoples, colonization depends on the transformation of land and water into bordered territory that can be claimed, surveyed, defined, depopulated, and resettled. And so, while the specific meridian defined by Treaty of Tordesillas would be strategically ignored by other imperial powers as they initiated their own colonizing projects, the line extended as a technology of territorial definition and possession across the surface of the Earth.

Within colonial processes, two functions of the border are paramount: borders not only inscribe colonialism into the Earth, parceling land into property, but they also legitimize this inscription, as colonists pose Indigenous land without the borders they recognized as ‘empty.’ This putative emptiness is, more precisely, an emptying-out, a conceptual deletion of Indigenous landscapes that precede, allow, and authorize the material erasure of those landscapes, and the human and non-human beings that sustain and are sustained by them. In this context, “frontier” names the border between land bordered by colonialism and unbordered Indigenous lands. Fredrick Jackson Turner’s (2009:776) words about the United States – that “the frontier is the line of the most rapid and effective Americanization” – have come to apply to every other colonizing nation-state.

Grids and Fences

In both South and North America, colonists occupied Indigenous lands both by force and, through the action of the grid, by urban planning. In the South, this process was enacted with the multiple and complicated applications of a set of rules most often summarized as the Laws of Indies, which effectively signaled the presence of various powers – empire, church, local authorities – within the land. In the North, the Public Land Survey System (PLSS), enacted with the National Ordinance of 1785 and better known as the Jefferson grid, transformed the landscape into property to be bought and sold. A foundational moment for Indigenous genocide in the United States, the Jefferson grid cartographically occupied territory before its actual settlement and prepared its transformation into real estate (Ostler, 2016).

In Colonial Lives of Property, Brenna Bhandar (2018:3) writes that there cannot be a history of private property law, as the subject of legal studies and political theory in early modern England, that is not at the same time a history of land appropriation in Ireland, the Caribbean, North America and beyond.

Bhandar suggests that these histories – one of private property and the other of colonial land appropriation – are each histories of enclosure and the bordering instruments that advanced and authorized enclosure.

As Gary Fields (2017:128) writes in Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror, “an improved landscape was not only land under crop, but was verifiable through the visible markers of fences, walls, and hedges,” all materializations of borders in what was initially an imagined landscape of colonial possession. Furthermore, the fencing required for the cattle herding and monocrop agriculture practiced by settlers accelerated the depletion of the land and radically augmented the desire for more territory; even the wood required by the extensive practice of fencing itself contributed to the deforestation of the land (Cronon, 2003:127-156).

John Locke’s (1689) essay, “On Property,” has been regarded as a philosophical justification for colonialism. It is also a practical justification for enclosure and the system of borders – between properties of colonists and colonial possessions – that enclose. Locke’s essay turns on the purported capacity of colonists to use land more productively than Indigenous people. At the same time, Locke poses what he calls the “wild Indian” from America as someone “who knows no inclosure [sic],” and that without the tradition of ‘possessing’ land by enclosure, the ‘Indian’ could not cultivate it as productively as English colonists, who separate private land from common land to cultivate and make manifest its productive capacities. Thus, while the history of settler colonialism is also a history of environmental disaster, decolonization points the way towards environmentally sustainable futures.

The Trench of Alsina

While what we now know as North America was partitioned through the grid and subdivided by
03· Jordan Wysocki. Plano general de la nueva línea fronteriza de los llanos pampeanos, construido por orden del Ministro de Guerra y Marina, 1877. / General plan of the new border line of the Pampas plains, built by the order of the Minister of War and Navy, 1877.

Fuente / Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

04· Jordan Wysocki. Secciones de trincheras para suelos blandos y duros, 1877. / Trench sections for soft and hard soils, 1877.

In both South and North America, colonists occupied Indigenous lands both by force and, through the action of the grid, by urban planning.
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group, which includes Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, and others, argues that modernity itself is defined by the processes of colonization prompted by the European arrival to the Americas. The acceleration of commerce prompted by this event, they argue, is ultimately a fundamental component in the development of capitalism and thus a formative aspect of modernity. And yet, colonial bordering has also extended beyond the Colonialocene, from formally colonized spaces to spaces occupied by colonizers. Indeed, contemporary bounded Indigenous territories are still being decimated for extraction, from Standing Rock to the disestablishment of the Mashpee Wampanoag homelands (Cromwell, 2020). Rather than thinking of the border as a phenomenon of the nation-state, then, we might understand it as a colonial geo-epistemology that encompasses gridding, separating land and water, and the delineation of property lines. In this sense, the border becomes a colonial construct at multiple scales, dividing property, cities, regions, states, and even species.

To be ‘at the border,’ then, is to be in a place that invokes the promise of decolonization. Following Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), decolonization should be understood as the rematriation of land. “Land” here refers not just to territory but also to air, water, plant life, animal life, and the Indigenous life that sustains and is sustained by the preceding. In other words, land encompasses the range of Indigenous worlds in their specific contexts. ‘Rematriation’ thus refers not just to the return of land, but to the regeneration of sustaining and sustainable relations with the land’s constituent parts. The rematriation of land is not a metaphor: it is the specific and irreplaceable horizon of restoring land to Indigeneity. The motion of turning towards this horizon, of yearning for it, is the unraveling of border thinking.

As settlers working on occupied land, we might initiate this motion by moving the focus of our thinking from border to relation. The work of Martinican poet Édouard Glissant (1997) on creolization is useful in this respect, as he understands notions of identity to be constructed in relation rather than in isolation. If identity is constructed through our relations with others, by regenerating our relations with the land and its constituent parts, we can go past identity formations established by settler colonialism. Glissant (2009) speaks of relations as a reconceptualization of the border, in which meaning is constructed not in the action of bounding but in that of passage or communication:

We need to put an end to the idea of a border that defends and prevents, etc. Borders must be permeable. They must not be weapons against migration or immigration processes. But having said this, I think that borders are necessary in order to appreciate the passage from the flavor of one country to the flavor of another. I find it quite pleasant to pass from one atmosphere to another through crossing a border. Consequently, what we need today is not the abolition of borders, but to provide them with another meaning. That of a passage, a communication – a relation.

Regenerating relations – among humans, across species, between nations – counters and contests border thinking. Bolivian Ayamara scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui extends this understanding to history when she speaks of “a decolonization of imaginaries and of the forms of representation.” Rivera Cusicanqui (2011:95-109) – a critic of the Modernity/Coloniality group – proposes that the Indigenous world “does not conceive of history as linear; the past-future is contained in the present.” Accordingly, decolonization is not a moment to reach, but one that emerges at any point in time as Indigenous peoples claim their own historicity. Following Rivera Cusicanqui, then, the writing of history can be thought of as a potentially decolonizing practice: one that can help us regenerate our relations with each other and with the land. **ARQ**

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**NOTES**

1. “More systematically than anyone before him, Locke enjoined owning land with enclosing it, cultivating it, and improving it to the fullest. In setting out these parameters, Locke broadened the notion of emptiness while establishing the conditions for taking possession of empty land. His work was thus not only a philosophical defense of English dominium in Indian country; it represented the legal and philosophical foundations of an imagined landscape of property across North America” (Fields, 2017:152).


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