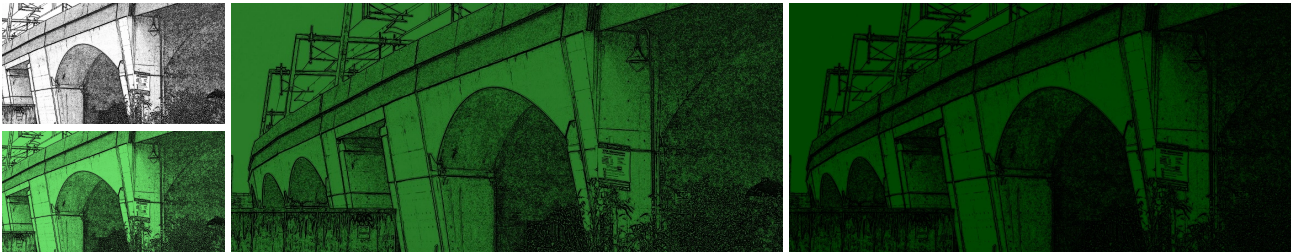


Gender and Megaprojects in the Americas

Interdisciplinary Working Group–GenMegAA

Post-progress infrastructures: material-affective structures that sustain the pluriverse (or world of worlds)



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I had just returned to Europe from Madre de Deus, a Peruvian province gravely impacted by the radical changes that the construction of the interoceanic highway had brought about, when I received an invitation to discuss Judith Butler's chapter on vulnerability and resistance. In this text, she is concerned with "failing infrastructures" and suggests that the "dependency on infrastructure for a livable life seems clear".^[1] I was struck by the ways in which such a conception of infrastructure is reflective of both a specific cultural (or maybe I should say, cosmovisional) background and geopolitical positionality. I wondered how I could explain Indigenous resistance against infrastructure megaprojects to students in the global North, as well as different possible understandings of the term itself.

The interoceanic highway, inaugurated in 2011, cut through an area of primary rain forest. It promised 'development and progress' for the region through integration between the countries Peru and Brazil and the stimulation of local economies. Whilst the benefits to local residents remain ambiguous and unequally distributed between different population groups and professional sectors, the infrastructure project triggered environmentally destructive land use, such as illegal mining and deforestation, monocultures and cattle farming, further road construction and the contamination of local river systems.

The region of Madre de Dios is characterized by cultural and ethnic diversity: six different ethnic groups reside in the gold extraction zone of the Madre de Dios River basin alone.^[iii] The Indigenous peoples did not ask for the transoceanic highway to be built or to become 'economically integrated' into global markets, and the economic benefits they can skim from the new infrastructure are scarce. The statement of an indigenous leader "Not one banana we have gained from it", stuck with me. Indigenous lives became radically transformed. A notable rise of small-scale, informal and illegal mining activities in the area spawned an influx of migrants trying their luck in the search for gold, seeking prosperity and a better life. The mining boom, sustained by the continuous increase in the international price of metals, altered profoundly people's relationship with the land, forest and water – even among some local Indigenous. The road, hence, imposed a new territoriality, thereby reconfiguring Indigenous cultural survival, a process that is often experienced as violence.



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Returning to Butler's concern of understanding the condition of life in the face of consistently failing infrastructure. In her view, humans are inherently dependent on infrastructures, when left without, their vulnerability comes to the fore. Butler deplors the lack of provision or removal of adequate infrastructure for the homeless, shantytown and favela dwellers, immigrants and minority groups. The demands for establishing and keeping adequate infrastructure are meaningful and important in contexts, in which those have become inseparably tied to networks of support, subsistence and the everyday organization of survival. The danger is, however, that a *claim for infrastructure* reproduces a developmentalist and Eurocentric vision of the world, in which life-sustaining infrastructures need to be brought to people, as 'quasi-saviors', which Western technologies and corporations will supply.

Jelena Vasiljević has criticized the "non-pre-political nature of infrastructure" in Butler's account,^[iii] highlighting that infrastructures are never "neutral" or "unbiased", but in fact support and maintain inequalities as well, and are implicated in the distribution of vulnerability. Therefore, she claims, infrastructure does "not only safeguard us against precarity but simultaneously (re)produces precarious and vulnerable bodies".^[iv]

Infrastructures have been defined as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people or ideas and allow their exchange over space”,^[vi] as such they “sustain society” and “generate the environment of daily life.” Some authors have pointed out, however, that infrastructure should be seen not only as networks of hardware, but as the “interrelated and mutable arrangements of people and nature^[vii]. As such, infrastructures also “give form” to culture, society and politics.^[viii] Subsequently, we can understand infrastructures as “sociotechnical assemblages,” i.e. particular arrangements of people, things and materials that together engender larger technological systems.^[viii]

The author Carlos Rodríguez Wallenius asserts that the construction of megaprojects, including large-scale infrastructure projects such as hydroelectric dams, transport corridors, pipelines and airports, imposes an “extractive territoriality”,^[ix] which subordinates and reconfigures rural ways of life and local economies. In this way, such projects facilitate the extraction of resources (or rather of “common goods”), the transit of goods and the circulation of capital. Among the negative effects are, for instance: backroom deals between governments, companies and local authorities who are pressured to give in to the interests of big capital; community division and conflicts; pressure on and deception of landholders; forced displacement and related trauma; discriminatory discourses that seek to invisibilize, denigrate and isolate opponents; generation of a climate of fear and repression to debilitate the wider social support of opposition movements; and criminalization of land defenders.



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It is important to remember, how many of these “great infrastructures”, such as railways, aqueducts, canals, bridges and roads have come about historically: They hinged on the dispossession of Indigenous land, the enslavement of Black people and the indentured labor by impoverished migrants of different origins. Indigenous scholar Anne Spice regards infrastructures, such as pipelines on indigenous land, as “colonial

technology of governance".^[xi] and considers the current expansion of infrastructure projects as tightly linked to the ongoing displacement and expropriation of land in the hands of Indigenous peoples. Just as "infrastructures of empire,"^[xii] contemporary infrastructures continue to invade the territories of Indigenous, Black and peasant communities, where they irreversibly change the existing socio-territorial order.

The major work of infrastructures is to do with world-making. By 'world', I mean a particular – always co-constitutive – set of conditions of being and relating to both other humans and the other-than-human world. The world-making of infrastructures is therefore always material and affective at the same time, as well as grounded in a particular cosmivision or political ontology. Political ontology refers to the power-infused practices involved in bringing into being a particular world or ontology.^[xiii] What has been made by colonial and modern/colonial/capitalist infrastructures is what Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, has called the extractive-assimilation system."^[xiv] This system does not only take material wealth, but maybe even more grievously, removes all the relations that gave what is being extracted meaning.

Whilst relying on the trope of "broken infrastructures"^[xv] in the face of infrastructural decline, deindustrialization and the shrinking of the American welfare state, Lauren Berlant coins the term "commons infrastructure", as the fragile arrangements of people attempting to survive in a deeply precarious and damaged neoliberal world. Post-progress infrastructures replace lost support systems; they are cobbled together and makeshift, but they also cling to the notion of the public. Berlant believes that such infrastructural formations bear a potential to rebuild a different world, as they generate emergent communities.

Whilst I agree that new worlds can emerge from ruins, I contend that other ways of worlding require more than an affirmative social community trying to make ends meet amongst decaying infrastructures. To flourish, communities also need a vital, collective space for existence that ensures their survival: that is territory. No life can be generated from "sacrifice zones":^[xvi] where territories have been depleted by extractivism,^[xvii] and water and soil has been contaminated by toxic substances. This is why in recent decades the defense of life and of territory has emerged as the core element of social mobilizations by Indigenous, Afro-descendent and peasant communities across the Americas.



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Territory is more than a swathe of land or geographic space: it involves specific ways of creating and living life. There can be infinite ways of “worlding” life that can be generated from vital territories. Yet, any reworlding – the cultivation, maintenance and repair of a complex, heterogenous web of life – depends on liveliness and flourishing of what in Western terms would be the natural world. Only on such territories, other communal and relational ways of living can emerge, persist or re-exist, as in the case of colonised peoples. Modern/colonial capitalism, and by extension neoliberal globalization, have waged a war against relational and collectively engendered worlds.

In the face of global warming, biodiversity loss and species extinction the powerful enchantment of the modern/colonial/capitalist world system has begun to wear off. The linear narrative of eternal growth has become interrupted. Now is post-progress – remaking life from ruins in toxic landscapes. Our current “one world” is a zoned world^[xviii] divided into territories that are all connected to the global circuits of capital in specific ways. There are zones designated to resource extraction, to consumption, to waste disposal; connected by transport routes that allow for circulation between them. It is clear that there is an urgent necessity to reimagine infrastructures so that they generate the kinds of flows that allow to “world” life in different ways and sustain multiple, interrelated worlds at the same time: infrastructures that sustain the pluriverse.^[xviii] Such pluriversal infrastructures need to, firstly, service the local communities and their reproduction of life in self-defined ways, and secondly, the work they do needs to be grounded on an ethics of mutuality between communities and caring relationships with other-than-humans and the natural environment.

To do these things, they might need to become smaller. Microprojects, rather than megaprojects. Built on local rather than external expertise. Their operability user-friendly. Designed either for long-term use or otherwise to decompose, leaving no trace. Enabling simultaneously low-carbon lives and time-space decompression, permeability for the different routes of other-than-humans and rewilding – as well as respect of the sacred.

Notes

[i] Butler, Judith. 2016, p. 12.

[ii] Moore, Thomas. 2003.

[iii] Vasiljević, Jelena. 2016.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Larkin, Brian. 2013, p. 328.

[vi] Cross, Jamie. 2016.

[vii] Bruun Jensen, Casper & Morita, Atsuro. 2017.

[viii] Harvey, Penny & Knox, Hannah. 2015.

[ix] Rodríguez Wallenius, Carlos. 2015.

[x] Spice, Anne. 2018.

[xi] Cowen, Deborah. 2019.

[xii] Blaser, Mario. 2014. The concept political ontology, as I use it, emphasizes that a collective way of being is never an essential one, but always already involves a decision or selection based on particular affective relations and/or acts of will and therefore is political.

[xiii] Betasamosake Simpson, Leanne. 2017.

[xiv] Berlant, Lauren. 2016.

[xv] Lerner, Steve. 2010.

[xvi] A good definition for extractivism can be found in Gudynas, Eduardo. 2013.

[xvii] Ong, Aihwa. 2016.

[xviii] For a definition of the pluriverse see Blaser, Mario. & De la Cadena, Marisol. 2018 or Escobar, Arturo. 2018.

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