

Countertopographies and the futures of geographical thought

Abstract

In this commentary, I adapt Derickson's (2020) conception of the 'annihilation of time by space' to reflect on an experience of making a documentary about women-led resistance to hydrocarbon development in Southern Bolivia, where the forging of new spatial knowledges, practices, and relations – or countertopographies of extraction – played a critical role in disrupting fossil futures. I consider what geographers might learn from these women's example about the potentialities of space and materiality for shifting our collective understandings of disciplinary futures through the making of place-specific countertopographies.

Disrupting fossil futures

The invitation to contribute to this special issue arrived as I was editing a documentary on women-led resistance to hydrocarbon development in the Tariquía National Reserve of Flora and Fauna in southern Bolivia (Anthias, 2022). I became aware of the conflict in 2017, when a group of women led a march to the regional capital, Tarija. Two years later, women from a second area of the park blockaded a bridge for five months, preventing the entry of heavy machinery for drilling. What struck me most in recording the women's testimonies was not their protest tactics, as inspiring as they were. Rather, I was impressed by how they had sought to inform themselves and others about the impacts of extraction; that is, by how they had forged new spatial knowledge and relations as a means to disrupt the futurities of fossil fuel capital.

When the oil companies arrived in the territory, they promised secure employment, a market for local produce, improvements to roads, and schools. They distributed free stoves and gas cylinders. Unconvinced, the women decided to visit existing hydrocarbon areas of the nearby Chaco region – predominantly Indigenous territories – to see the impacts of extraction for themselves. There, they heard first-hand accounts of contaminated water, sick animals, failed crops, and broken agreements over jobs and benefits. They shared this knowledge in community meetings and through the circulation of videos on mobile phones. It was seeing these impacts with their own eyes that inspired the women to declare: 'Now we're going to take a stand, we're not going to let the oil companies enter, even if we have to chain ourselves to the bridge' (16:35-16:48). The blockade, which culminated in a seven-day march to the regional capital, made the violence of extraction visible to a broader regional audience, as images of rural women confronting armed police circulated on social media. Before long, 'Tariquía no se toca!' (Don't touch Tariquía!) had become a key slogan in urban environmental activism and competing local electoral campaigns. To date, the oil companies have not returned to Chiquiacá.

It is well-known that corporations seeking to manufacture consent conjure imagined futures of progress, development, and material improvement, while seeking to hide the dispossession and ecological destruction caused by their activities. Of course, they don't always succeed, and 'visions of material betterment, personal and collective transformation' associated with oil and gas development are often marred by 'experiences and anticipations of their destructive force' (Weskalnys, 2016: 13). By travelling through space and engaging extraction's materiality – as narrated by their guaraní hosts – women from Chiquiacá intervened in the production of affect around imagined futures of hydrocarbon development. In the Chaco, they witnessed their own possible future – and rejected it. In doing so, they refused not only the oil companies' bribes, but also national discourses of development that link extraction to social redistribution, 'living well', and even decolonisation.

The annihilation of time by space

In her response to Deborah Cowen's 2019 *Urban Geography* Plenary Lecture, Kate Derickson's (2020) develops the notion of the 'annihilation of time by space' to describe how recent work on settler colonialism and racial capitalism disrupts liberal progress narratives by reinterpreting spaces 'as temporally sedimented in causal, consequential ways' (488). Cowen's method of 'following the infrastructure' exemplifies this analytic, connecting disparate archives of Indigenous dispossession, transatlantic slavery, and unfree migrant labour that underwrite the material geographies of contemporary (settler colonial) cities. The 'time' that is being disrupted here is both the autological time of the settler subject – which assumes a radical break with prior histories – and the liberal notion of time as linear, teleological progress toward a more just present and future.

Derickson's phrase returned to me as I trawled through the documentary footage, piecing together the women's testimonies with the footage of their visits to the Chaco. Here, it was not only the landscape's violent colonial past that was unveiled by travelling through space and attending to its materiality, but also its violent colonial present and the futures of ruin it has in store for not-yet-exploited territories. As this reminds us, primitive accumulation and dispossession are not only historic antecedents to contemporary geographies waiting to be uncovered in the landscape or in the archive, but also ongoing processes; a perpetual 'dark side' of liberal modernity. Latin American scholars have used the concept of 'sacrificial territories' to highlight how populations in strategic spaces of resource development are rendered invisible and expendable as they suffer unequal environmental burdens alongside an absence of state protection. Their invisibility owes not only to the 'slow' nature of ecological violence (Nixon, 2013), but also to their rendering as outside the becoming space-time of the settler/(post)colonial nation-state. It is no surprise that Indigenous territories are disproportionately positioned as sacrifice zones. Here, liberalism's temporal split works together with capital's continual re-inscription of *terra nullius* to hide material processes of displacement, contamination, and theft. In this sense, extractive sacrifice zones are but one iteration of the broader logics of spatial apartheid (Mbembe, 2019a). The deepening of an oil-fuelled ecological crisis does little to address such erasures; indeed, Anthropocene imaginaries may legitimise new forms of extractive violence as expendable populations are sacrificed in the name of humanity's common salvation (DeBoom, 2021).

What might geographers learn from these activists about the radical possibilities of spatial engagement and praxis for shifting our collective understandings of the future?

Reorienting the futures of geographical thought

The voices that have historically defined the 'futures of Geography' are those upheld by structural relations of colonialism, extractivism, and racial capitalism. Historically, the discipline's mission was in furthering Empire – a spatial project that rested on the temporal positioning of colonised societies as 'backward'. Fossil fuel development saw the emergence of temporal imaginaries of limitless growth and the construction of 'the economy' as a sphere separate from its resource base (Mitchell, 2011), leading the spatial scientists of the 1960s to imagine their role as mapping economic activities in space. As Oswin (2020) observes, the emergence of Marxist, feminist, and humanist geographies since the 1960s, followed by the 'cultural turn' of the 1990s, led to a distancing from Geography's colonial origins, but it also shaped a narrative of disciplinary progress that produced its own erasures:

While pundits crowed about bright futures on the horizon, they downplayed the suffering and premature death that remained a predominant and preventable feature of existence everywhere. They/we hyped the appearance of change while allowing structural oppression and exploitation to roll on such that, today, selective destruction obviously continues (12).

Povinelli (2018: 1) identifies the horizon as a key spatial imaginary of liberalism, deployed ‘to bracket all forms of violence as the result of the unintended, accidental, and unfortunate unfolding of liberalism’s own dialectic’. By describing such disciplinary narratives as ‘tall tales’, Oswin calls on us to recognise how disciplinary knowledge production colludes in liberal futurities and their ‘bracketing out’ of past and present forms of spatial and racial violence. Even critical branches of the discipline can be guilty of such manoeuvres – from the historical blind spots of Anthropocene narratives (McEwan, 2021) to speculative futures of indigeneity (Chandler and Reid, 2020). As Dekeyser (2022) argues, the gesture towards ‘worldly futuring’ has become, at least in certain strands of contemporary geographical thought, something of a habit. Indeed, applications for research funding often require that we frame our research in such terms: as helping to create a better world, offering hope at a time of planetary crisis. And this is to say nothing of the parts of our discipline that actively contribute toward imperial and neo-colonial geographies, including through partnerships with state and corporate entities that serve extractivist and military agendas (Bryan, 2010).

As Oswin (2020) notes, there are signs of more disruptive change; ‘other geographies’ have begun to assert themselves with growing force, visible in the interventions of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Global South geographers and those variously positioned ‘on the margins’. While such knowledges have been developing for many years, their challenge to Eurocentric theory and exclusionary institutions has become increasingly difficult to ignore. What might the ‘annihilation of time by space’ have to offer at this conjuncture?

First, recognising our own (diverse) locations and embeddedness within liberal-extractivist spatiotemporality requires that we think harder about which voices, what geographies, whose theories, and from where, are centred within disciplinary knowledge production. Following the example of women from Chiquiacá, we might ask: How can engaging space and materiality, ‘following the infrastructure’, and ‘learning to learn from below’ (Spivak, 2012) shift our understanding of the ‘futures’ of geographical thought? How might our knowledge production amplify the interruptive potentialities of ‘other geographies’ (Oswin, 2020)? While speaking from/for Geography’s elsewheres is no simple task, recognising the blind spots of disciplinary knowledge production is a necessary starting point. This may entail letting go of a desire to position ourselves ‘at the frontier’ of contemporary debates. As Noxolo (2022) argues, centring Black spatial thought and agency requires a refusal to start from the questions posed by white geography.

Second, it is important to reflect on how, methodologically, geographical praxis might contribute to the ‘annihilation of time by space’, including through the construction of countertopographies (Katz, 2011). Katz defines countertopographies as detailed examinations of particular material spaces that ‘provide the ground – literally and figuratively – for developing a critique of the social relations sedimented into space and for scrutinizing the material social practices at all geographical scales through which place is produced’ (2011: 1229). In my rendering of her concept, space is not only a source of critical knowledge, but also an arena for the construction of new subjectivities, solidarities, spatial tactics, and visions of a collective future. In fact, Derickson hints at this possibility. Reflecting on her mapping work in Minneapolis, she asks:

What are the social relations engendered through these acts of knowing, and what work does this knowledge do in the world? The analytical move to annihilate time by space has powerful critical potential, but it is only potential. The real impact lies in the social relations engendered in the act of constructing these narrations (490-1).

Oswin points us in a similar direction, urging an abandonment of disciplinary practices in which “Others” are set artificially apart, rendered isolated objects of study rather than knowledge co-producers’ (2020: 13).

In the first instance, our documentary set out to record women’s testimonies of their own countertopographies – which involved multi-sited research, collective analysis, movement building, and direct action. Yet, in the process, it became part of this countertopography, bringing their insights and experiences to new publics in Bolivia and beyond: opening new spaces for critical dialogue and reflection. A focus on countertopography decentres the role of the researcher, positioning our research praxis within broader fields of knowledge production and spatial politics. Audio-visual methods are particularly apt for countertopography because they enable participants to narrate space and materiality on their own terms and for this knowledge to be transmitted to diverse audiences, including those who do not read texts. Documentary is not just about documenting but also about making stories, enrolling publics, convening, transforming, worlding. Within such processes, epistemologies from elsewhere can travel not just to centres of disciplinary knowledge production but to spaces where other (distinct but connected) struggles over the future are unfolding. Of course, a subset of geographers have long engaged with such alternative forms of storytelling, including through collaborations with filmmakers and other visual artists (Nassar, 2022).

It is important to recognise the institutional barriers to engaging in this kind of work, which does not fit with the incentive structures of the neoliberal university and, as such, may be impossible for precarious scholars, not to mention those too overworked to have any substantive research practice. It is also important to acknowledge the geopolitical inequalities that position me as a Global North scholar able to access funding and institutional support to conduct such work in Bolivia – a country where many talented researchers and filmmakers do not enjoy such luxuries. Ghosh (2021) is right to ask how many Global North scholars would be willing to give up these privileges to see a world of radically reconfigured power relations. In such a world, my role would be radically transformed, if not rendered redundant. Noxolo (2020), referencing Bolivian Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012), draws attention to the broader institutional barriers to centring Black and Indigenous spatialities, as well as the danger of selective appropriation. But she also notes that ‘digital affordances make new experiments in multi-lingual and multi-modal communication accessible to many more globally’, holding ‘a promise of more transnationally dialogic futures’ (2020: 1236).

It is not my intention to suggest that all geographers should become filmmakers. However, I find the concept of ‘annihilating time by space’ a provocative one. I see in it an invitation to experiment with collaborative ways of engaging space and materiality as a means of collective learning and co-theorisation across difference. As geographers, it prompts us to reflect on where we think from, whose geographical knowledge counts, and what kinds of social and spatial relations are engendered through our research praxis. How our academic institutions might be reformed in the service of such a vision in contexts of deepening marketisation is a question that goes beyond the scope of this commentary, but one that undoubtedly connects to our own capacities for collective mobilisation.

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