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Sharlene Mollett
University of Toronto, sharlene.mollett@utoronto.ca

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Sharlene Mollett

Department of Human Geography and the Centre for Critical Development Studies
Department of Geography and Planning
University of Toronto

sharlene.mollett@utoronto.ca
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Normally, I have no idea when the NFL football season begins. It seems to simply appear as summer turns to autumn. In 2016, however the NFL pre-season could not go unnoticed, nor could San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick. For those who managed to miss this story, Kaepernick’s refusal to stand for the national anthem during a pre-game moment of military appreciation made international headlines. At the time, his one-man protest was as an act of civil disobedience in the face of a long and recent history of police brutality and racial oppression in the United States.¹ As Kaepernick insists, “I’m not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color”. He continues “…there are bodies in the street and people [police officers] getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (NFL.com 2016). Kaepernick’s protest reveals someone who recognizes that racism (and injustices more generally) will not simply disappear by looking away.

It is in this vein that I welcome the invitation to reflect on what a critical turn, a move towards more “critical and progressive scholarship,” might look like in the Journal of Latin American Geography (JLAG) (Gaffney et al 2016:1). Of course, this is not the first time in recent memory that critical geographers working in the region have sought to reflect on what it means to be “critical.” These efforts have popped up as both special issues and conference presentations since at least 2005 (Sundberg 2005; Kingsbury and Sletto 2005). Also we must acknowledge that there exists a robust mini-subfield of critical Latin Americanists who have made important contributions on various topics including migration and inequality, gentrification, race and urban space, women’s environmental knowledges, indigenous mapping, the politics of biodiversity conservation, extraction, land titling, labour injustice and femicide to name a few (Wainwright 2008; Swanson 2010; Werner 2011; Finn 2012; Mollett 2013; Ojeda 2013; Wright 2014; Hanson 2015; Bastia 2015; Bryan 2015). What is different now however is that the new editorial team is calling upon scholars, much like those cited above, to populate the journal with scholarship that offers “a conceptually pluralistic and geographically extensive understanding of Latin America” and research that “explicitly challenges the injustices of this notoriously unequal region and explores avenues for change” (Gaffney et al. 2016).

Such a cogent call deserves celebration, particularly because much of the inequality that occurs in Latin America operates globally as well. Indeed, racial and gender violence is planetary: racial profiling and police brutality, the recent Brexit decision in the UK, the Trump Presidency in the US, the detention of child migrants and refugee claimants, human trafficking; a post-apartheid era that has only galvanized racial hierarchies in South Africa; impunity for gang rapes in both conflict zones and so-called democratic states; honor killings, disproportionate rates of poverty among indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and the
Notwithstanding important forms of resistance, the continuity of racial and gender inequalities is so rampant that one wonders if most people unaffected by such events actually move through the world asleep. Kaepernick certainly does not, and nor should we. If we want our work to be meaningful beyond academia, then commitment to more progressive and critical geographic knowledge production is urgent.

In this commentary, I reflect on JLAG’s invitation for critical scholarship on Latin America. In doing so, I suggest that this turn should prioritize and counter against what has been undertheorized and ignored to date, namely, racial and gendered power. In an admittedly unscientific and superficial peruse of JLAG titles, abstracts, and keywords since 2010, I could not ignore the paucity of research attending to racial power and racialized processes, patriarchy, Afro-descendant peoples, and gendered-based violence. While there is slightly more interest in indigenous peoples, particularly their landscapes, livelihoods, and mapping them both, very few articles engage in racial formations of plantation agriculture or settler appropriation, and there is almost no trace of critical feminist and postcolonial theorizing. While the new (all white male) editorial team is not responsible for this oversight, changing focus will undoubtedly be their challenge. In the following section, I make three suggestions or offer “food for thought” as we approach what I hope is a new era in Latin Americanist Geography.

First, while social difference is more openly acknowledged as a factor of urban injustice (Finn 2012; Swanson 2010; Garmany 2013), Latin Americanists are slower to explicitly recognize the saliency of racism and patriarchy within the arenas of Latin American environment and development (i.e. land grabbing scholarship). One of the ways JLAG can counter this trend is to prioritize scholars whose work responds to global environmental change and overlapping social and cultural geographic debate. For instance, over the last seven years, the ongoing ripple effects of the Honduran coup have been ubiquitous. Repression, death threats, unlawful detention and assassinations against journalists, judges and environmental and indigenous activists occur almost daily. In particular, the post-coup regime targets indigenous and Afro-descendant community and environmental leaders, and is punctuated by the violent attack by police and unlawful detention of Garifuna leader Miriam Miranda in 2014. Miranda and other leaders including men, women and youth, at the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras, (OFRANEH) a national level community development organization, work tirelessly on behalf of biodiversity protection, anti-extraction efforts and land rights in Honduras. So did the late Berta Cáceres, who was a Lenca environmentalist and leader of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) and the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize winner. Regretfully, Cáceres was assassinated in her home in March 2016. Both the orchestrators of Miranda’s attack and Cáceras’ murder remain unpunished. For OFRANEH and COPINH, environmental struggles are not separate from the racial and ethnic subjugation that they face as indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. Their demands to be included in land titling projects, for example, is not simply because they are poor and marginalized, but because their human rights are tied to the fact that their ancestors were present in Honduras before the arrival of the
Honduran state, the same state and state-sanctioned capitalists that seek their removal. Such power relations shape historical and geographical knowledge production and for critical scholars are empirical, and cannot be ignored (Mollett 2016; Garcia 2011).

Race and gendered violence are also obscured in much of the scholarship on extraction, and yet according to recent news events, such violence is salient. In Peru, illegal mining is changing topography and undermining food security and water access among Amazonian indigenous populations. According to the Guardian, a 2015 report by the Peruvian Ministry of Environment and the Carnegie Institute for Science in the United States, the region of Madre de Dios is experiencing unprecedented mining-induced forest loss (Jones 2016; Hill 2016). As a major gold exporter, gold production has meant contaminated rivers and the fish therein and environmental and embodied tragedies from chemical poisoning for local people. Making matters worse, according to a report by Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GIATOC), illegal goldmining operations are frequently controlled by drug traffickers and organized crime operations (GIATOC 2016). In addition to an increasingly toxic environment, young women and girls are recruited to work in service jobs, but upon arrival they quickly become indebted servants where recruiters charge for transportation, food, clothing and accommodations that were promised to be free before arrival. When they cannot pay, women are sent to work in brothels and girls as young as 12 are often compelled to accept “el pase,” they are auctioned off as “virgins” where operators “sell” their virginity to miners (GIATOC 2016). According to Livia Wagner, the author of the Global Initiative’s report, auction prices are determined by race and geography. She claims “the miners prefer to have white girls. That means from the coast area or from the north. They don’t pay so much for the girls from the Andean region—indigenous communities, darker skin” (Hill 2016).

Peru is only one of many places that the atrocities of illegal mining are destroying people and the environment. In Venezuela, Indigenous Yanomani people “have been found with slave numbers on their shoulders” and in Bolivia, children comprise roughly one third of the labour force in illegal mining (Jones 2016). In mining regions in Potosi, children have been reportedly sold, presumably as labor, at a price of three to seven dollars per child (Jones 2016). Race and sexual violence (in this case slavery) are embedded in environment-development projects and when emptied out, our work becomes aspatial.

Second, the editorial plan to invest more in translation services is smart. Translation not only opens the journal to non-English speakers, but also brings the robust scholarship that circulates in Latin America to a non-Spanish speaking audience. This goal deserves celebration. Still, English language dominance and the pressure amongst Latin American scholars to publish in English language journals in the global north is not just an issue of translation, but colonialism.

I am reminded of the debate that emerged in fall of 2015 after Eduardo Gudynas referred to David Harvey’s framework “accumulation by dispossession” as a form of “friendly colonialism” (Gudynas 2015). In reflecting why so-called “progressive” Latin American
governments use Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession” as a tool of anti-imperial resistance, and yet continue to rely upon capitalist extraction, Gudynas writes “[i]n Latin America, we have a long and sad history of massive appropriation of our resources and of dispossession of indigenous peoples and peasants to enrich corporations and governments in other continents” (Gudynas 2015). As I read him, I understand that the popularity of “accumulation by dispossession” ignores and obscures the contributions of local thinkers and thus is complicit in the appropriation of Latin American knowledges. For Gudynas, a weakness in Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession” theory is that its novelty is somewhat exaggerated (my word). He refers to the framework as a fashion, or otherwise a fad (again my word), in part because “accumulation by dispossession” “allows global critiques (with the symbolic advantages of [Harvey’s] Marxist language) without requiring much on national predicaments” (Gudynas 2015). As Gudynas maintains “this fashion is a new symptom of intellectual colonialism, wherein many prefer to quote an English author… [over a Latin American scholar]…it is a friendly colonialism…because the idea of critique of global capitalism is attractive, but what goes unnoticed for this reason is that this is a form of colonialism, since we draw upon, copy, repeat or seek the legitimation” from the North and its institutions (Gudynas 2015).ii

Gudynas insists there are scholars who have made spatially contingent claims to theorize dispossession, and who pay close attention to ecological issues and indigenous peoples, largely neglected by Harvey (Gudynas 2015). But to further his cogent points, given the racial, ethnic and gendered hierarchies in Latin America that favor white, mestizo, Spanish language, western dress, urban and men over all others, translation alone is necessary but insufficient in challenging the white-Anglo-supremacy in Latin American geography. Rather this is an opportunity for JLAG to invite scholars of various backgrounds and using theoretical frameworks that are underrepresented in our discipline as part of its new direction. Such an invitation would not only be premised on language, but the acknowledgement that racial and gendered hierarchies in Latin America marginalize many scholars inside and outside the academy.

*Lastly, my third suggestion is to embrace underrepresented geographic subfields.* This new philosophy at JLAG liberates critical Latin Americanists to pursue research and writing through attention to multiple lines of inquiry and to acknowledge the social heterogeneity of the region. This new approach and more plural understandings of Latin American spatial formations may include important work from decolonial theorists such as Anibal Quijano, Maria Lugones, Arturo Escobar, and Ramon Grosfoguel, but also indigenous and Afro-descendant decolonial and anti-racists feminists scholars such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Juliet Hooker, John Anton and Ochy Curiel to name only a few. But we cannot stop there. As a feminist political ecologist who began writing on the mutual construction of race and property as a graduate student in the early 2000s, the field of social and cultural geography, although largely focussed on sites in the global north, helped articulate the relationship between race and space in ways that informed my interrogation on race and property in Honduras (please see Woods 1998; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Delaney 2002; Sundberg 2004; McKittrick 2006). Today critical social and cultural geography, in
particular, the subfields of black and indigenous geographies are employing frameworks and theories that are useful to understand an array of policies and practices in environment development, human rights, historical geography, gentrification, racism, settler colonialism and black and indigenous epistemologies, that help inform both past and present spatial formations in Latin America (and the globe). When combined with grounded geographic data collection and theoretical insights from the region, such blended insights will bring our work beyond political economic formulations and closer to the messy realities on the ground (Shabazz 2015; Coulthard 2014; Bressey 2014; Goeman 2014; Mahtani 2014; Mollett 2016). Making JLAG more critical is not necessarily about rejecting the north, but fusing critical scholarly insights from scholars who not only look to disrupt the privilege of Anglo geography but work to disclose and negate white supremacy and patriarchy in the global north and global south.

The new editorial team is certainly aware that to change the composition of scholarship will need more than a new statement of purpose, but a plural and diverse selection of editorial board members, reviewers lists, and explicit invitations to those who are in fact fluent in more critical research interests. We cannot continue to write as though the spheres of power in the global north and global south do not overlap. Neither people nor places are fixed. As scholars we travel back and forth to our research sites sharing and acquiring (unfortunately sometimes appropriating) knowledge from one site to the next. As well, European and North American elites, multinational executives and amenity migrants are quickly acquiring “cheap” land and services as they populate (colonize) various regions throughout the global south. Such mobilities and the spaces they reproduce are fluid. As geographers we are well positioned to illustrate the particular spatialities of power and inequality in Latin America, and once we do, let’s emulate Kaepernick’s courage and write against it.

I look forward to seeing the new editorial philosophy to come to life and hope that the multiple hierarchies and logics of power are reflected in forthcoming publications of the Journal of Latin American Geography.
References


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i Since his initial statement, Colin Kaepernick has received growing support both inside and outside the NFL.

ii To see the rather personal retort from Harvey’s team, not Harvey himself [https://lalineadefuego.info/2015/10/15/not-colonialists-and-not-nice-either-a-response-to-eduardo-gudynas/](https://lalineadefuego.info/2015/10/15/not-colonialists-and-not-nice-either-a-response-to-eduardo-gudynas/)