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Afterword: Militant Territoriality

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Amid all the chaos and ineptitude of his administration, United States President Donald Trump was clearest and most consistent in his stated desire to shut down the two-thousand mile border with Mexico. To prevent migrants from crossing into the United States, he wanted a border wall, electrified and topped with spikes, possibly with a moat stocked with snakes or alligators. He wanted border guards to shoot migrants in the legs to slow their progress. To expel undocumented immigrants, he sent storm troopers in surprise raids on homes and workplaces. As a deterrent, families were separated and children put in cages. In short, he envisioned the US as a caricature of a medieval fortress, a military garrison primed for war with outsiders.¹ During his political campaign and throughout his presidency, he has been fond of saying, “if you don’t have borders, you don’t have a country.” The territorial regime he envisioned was a militant one, defined less by governance than by extravagant cruelty toward alien enemies.

This vision of American territoriality, supported by no less than a third of US voters, draws attention away from the problem of neoliberal governmentality—the logics and rule-making regimes that make certain outcomes more likely than others—and toward the martial aspects of territorial rule. Force, conquest, and domination still underlie all the capillary powers of modern governance. If spectacular brutality obscures power’s more subtle and nefarious operations, it still deserves to be analyzed with all the care that transnational American studies has brought to the study of discursive meaning. The vital essays in this special forum nudge our awareness in that direction. In their analyses and mappings of American territorial rule and its discontents, these authors highlight a variety of struggles over political geography. One can see such contests as an indication of the plurality of territorial visions, or one can focus on the encompassing nature of the struggle itself, perhaps best characterized as a war without end.

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As this collection shows, the United States’s settler colonial origins in the displacement of Indigenous populations and the harnessing of coerced labor have been carried on

through the employment of imperialist techniques across the Americas, belying any neat distinction between the domestic and foreign. Within the formal ambit of US territory, responses to the expansion of slavery spurred the migration of Black people from the US to Canada in the mid-nineteenth century, offering a challenge to the system of slavery and its territorial claims and asserting a powerful alternative vision of political geography that invoked liberal precepts in British law to counter the legal authority of the slave regime. This vision pitted Black people against slaveholders, but within an international diplomatic contest over the character and magnitude of imperial influence.

Yet the extent of imperial reach is generally difficult to discern. American military might, for example, has often been concentrated in small but important places like Guam, commonplaces of empire that obscure their function by seeming unimportant on their own terms, even as they are fundamental to the operation of global power. US bases overseas enjoy “extraterritorial” arrangements that excuse them from local accountability, even as American voters do not consider their host locations to be worthy of political scrutiny. Indigenous people can protest without their views being registered by potential allies.

This silencing of Indigenous voices is also part of a long struggle. Settler colonialism suppresses local knowledge, naturalizing its own systems of thought and vocabularies of description even while appropriating Native expertise. This tactic has a centuries-long pedigree in the domination of colonized peoples, who have nevertheless continued to fight for sovereignty over the very terms of their being. Even in Indigenous storytelling, the tellers may refute colonialism by highlighting the way their own histories of place are tied into the narrative construction of identity, how land is woven into the storytelling conventions that situate the self in relation to human and nonhuman others.

These assertions of self speak powerfully to the always incomplete nature of conquest, territorial or otherwise. Visions of national territory as porous and besieged are not at all a new phenomenon. The regulatory regimes of nation and empire often malfunction in relation to immigrants, even when states presume a theoretically coherent immigration policy. From the example of Puerto Rico, we learn how territory is never just the settled outcome of a process of conquest, but rather a protean concept produced through the definition, withholding, and granting of rights. Geography—socially defined—shapes networks of belonging that move parallel to, overlap, and crosscut legal, political, and military decrees. These migratory networks facilitate tropes about the emptying of peoples’ home countries, even as the movement of people links them in their memories of home and the imagination of their connections to others in similar conditions of diaspora.

Violent conquest is the assumed backdrop to studies of empire and territorial rule—so widely assumed as to seem banal to arguments that shift quickly into the dissection of legal regimes or cultural discourses. But what if we keep belligerence at the center of concern? What this special forum has implicitly achieved is to nod toward

an agenda for a kind of reinvigorated military history. If that historiography's canon seems hoary and insular—too narrowly focused on state initiatives and the character of leaders, too technical in its emphasis on tactics and weaponry, too old and white—it also provides a wealth of tools to analyze how centuries of colonial war informed transformations in pan-American strategy, policy, and geographical positioning, and in the way that borders and jurisdictions are guaranteed by force, perhaps especially when they are most aspirational. Examining territoriality as a martial phenomenon grants special attention to the interplay between political choices and the changing methods of combatants over colonialism's long duration. By showing “foreign” and “domestic” governance to be inextricably intertwined with the threat of force and exemplary violence, such a military history would frame the struggles over opposing territorialities.

Along these lines, I have attempted to conscript military history into my own recent study of slavery and slave revolt in British colonial Jamaica. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*, about the Jamaican slave rebellion of 1760–1761, shows how the violence of imperial expansion and enslavement remade the spatial histories of eighteenth-century Europe, Africa, and America.² The book employs the concept of *diasporic warfare* to show how the turmoil of enslavement and the daily hostilities of life in bondage generated a militant response that traveled, took root, and sprouted in rebellions that reverberated across the Americas and back to Europe. Warfare mapped regional interconnections. European imperial conflicts extended the dominion of capitalist agriculture. African battles fed captives to the transatlantic trade in slaves. Masters and their subalterns struggled with one another continuously. The largest insurrection in British America before the American Revolution, Tacky's Revolt resulted in political transformations of empire, the reshaping of racial thought, and the implantation of enduring memories. Showing how wars in one part of the world travel and take root in another, the story seeks to enhance our understanding of the relationship between European, African, and American territorialities. Spatial schemas were the product of these violent struggles; placemaking arose from the battlefields of colonial conquest.

This process is crucial to understanding how settler colonial states work in practice, not just as a logic with certain key defining features, but also as a predicament of governance that encourages all kinds of self-defeating actions, including spasms of violence that may be effective for a time—sometimes a very long time—but can lead to the eventual ruin of such states. Donald Trump's militarist vision of territory betrays a brittleness and fragility: if you don't have borders you don't have a country. For all those subdued or stateless peoples without borders, no doubt the world's majority, a statement like that might betray an astonishing lack of resilience. States governed by such a weak and inelastic class of elites often depend on militarization and militarism, which yields societies that may grow accustomed to periodic outbursts of domestic violence as a common way of life—exemplified by high national murder rates, police

brutality, and urban uprisings. One can see these episodes as wars within wars, domestic conflagrations related in complex ways to the constant projection of force abroad. This unspooling of belligerence in every direction demands to be analyzed as a complex territorial phenomenon. As such, the critical frameworks for reading national, transnational, and other visions of spatial rule and resistance offered in this collection will be vital to orienting ourselves in the battles to come.

Notes

¹ Michael D. Shear and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Shoot Migrants’ Legs, Build Alligator Moat: Behind Trump’s Ideas for Border,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2019, updated October 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/politics/trump-border-wars.html>.

² Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

Selected Bibliography

Brown, Vincent. *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.

Further Reading

Schrader, Stuart. *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019.