Title
Tracing a Settler-Colonial Grammar of Place in Detention, Captivity, and Confinement

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/20v028qh

Journal
Thinking Gender 2017

Author
Mauricio, Diana (dee) Waleska

Publication Date
2017-04-01
Tracing a Settler-Colonial Grammar of Place in Detention, Captivity, and Confinement

Each year in the United States, the department of Homeland Security detains approximately 8,000 children for immigration violations. Most of these children are separated from their family and/or are unaccompanied minors. They range in age from newborns to seventeen year olds and often do not speak English. The most recent data obtained through a Freedom of Information Act requested by the Pew Research Center, illustrated a detailed overview of the age and home country of child migrants— depicts an increasing number of children arriving from Guatemala (Pew Research Center 2014). In the summer of 2014 I worked as a translator for paralegals working with the South Texas Pro Bono Asylum Representation (ProBar) Children’s Project in the Rio Grande Valley. ProBar was created in 1989 as part of a national effort to provide pro bono legal services to undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers detained in South Texas by the federal government, they primarily work with young women and children in detention.

As a translator with ProBar I witnessed the stories of children and women fleeing racialized and sexualized terror and violence. Rosalinda¹— a Maya, Quiche ten-year old girl from El Peten, Guatemala, fled from her home along with her older sister and mother. Rosalinda, along with her mother and sister were fleeing a man who beat them and sexually abused them repeatedly. Rosalinda and her family were very poor and depended on her father financially further exacerbating the abuse they faced. After being hospitalized from one of the many beatings, Rosalinda, her sister, and mother decided to immigrate to the United States and seek asylum. While migrating Rosalinda was detained by U.S border patrol and separated from her sister and mother. She was detained in Casa El Presidente in Brownsville, Texas, an all girls shelter— where I met her while translating her story from K’iche to Spanish for paralegals from ProBar. Unfortunately,

¹ I am using a pseudo name to maintain their confidentiality
Rosalinda’s story was just one of the many stories of young indigenous women fleeing physical, social, and economic violence. In the following paper I am interested in tracing the settler-colonial grammar of place that create these detention centers. I view these detention centers and the stories of these young women as a contemporary iteration of colonial violence due to an ongoing history of settler-colonialism’s violence and indigenous displacement. Furthermore, I hope to engage with the work of Mishuana Goeman, Shannon Speed, and Sherene Razack to analyze the settler-colonial grammar of space and place in detention centers and its consequences on the lives of indigenous people. Lastly, I turn to scholars such as Asma Abbas and their theories on love and trauma to argue that the experiences of these young women in detention must ultimately be understood in a larger context of settler-colonialism in Central America, thus helping us explore a larger narrative of generational trauma and violence.

In “Disrupting a Settler-Colonial Grammar of Place: The Visual Memoir of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie,” Mishuana Goeman, defines settler-colonial grammar of place as the social relationships informed by both institutional rules and social ideologies that make and give meaning to place. I extend this definition of settler-colonial grammar of place and put it in conversation with scholars like Shannon Speed to view how detention centers such as Casa El Presidente in Brownsville, Texas, exist because settler-colonial logic hinges upon the displacement of indigenous people and simultaneously recreates indigenous peoples subject hood as criminal. In the context of Guatemala– I argue in the same line as Shannon Speed– that Guatemala must be understood not just as a colonized nation with independence now but rather as a settler-colonial state.

During colonialism throughout Latin America, indigenous populations were disappeared, displaced, and murdered. In some places in Latin America up to 90% of the population was ex-
terminated, and that can be considered as part of the logics of extermination and thus, genocidal violence. Similar to settler-colonialism in the U.S, Guatemalan indigenous populations were displaced and relocated to places where they were more easily dominated and restricted. This is part of the settler-colonial grammar of place that creates the ideological, political, social and spatial composition of Guatemala.

In the case of the physical space and geographic composition of Guatemala, indigenous communities have been historically marginalized to the countries highlands. The highlands both in the north and the south– where many of the undocumented children and migrants are coming from, and where Rosalinda is from– are heavily populated by indigenous communities. These geographic locations also happen to be challenging to travel to and from. Often the mountainy terrain creates a challenging spatial composition for medical and legal services pushing indigenous communities to travel long distances to access these social services. The highlands have historically been violent and unsafe places for indigenous women. In fact Guatemala ranks as the third highest rate of femicide in Central America (UC Hastings 2011). During the Guatemalan civil war and genocide, the highlands were one of the sites with the highest rates of massacres, rape, scorched earth tactics, and mass burials. It is no coincidence then, that the highlands are today one of the most violent places, except that in the current political climate the violence emanates from the drug cartels that are being increasingly pushed into the backyards of indigenous communities. It is important to contextualize these spatial dynamics because I argue they make room for a settler-colonial grammar of place that is intrinsically tied to the social and political ideologies that establish what it means to be an indigenous person in Guatemala, and the what it means to be an indigenous Guatemalan in the U.S. Due to the high rates of crime and violence in
the highlands that are heavily populated by indigenous communities– indigeneity often becomes synonymous with criminal and “illegality.”

I now turn to Shannon Speed to further trace this settler-colonial grammar of place that gives rise to a grammar that equates indigenous with criminal. Guatemala along with other Latin American countries have been associated with a political climate of neoliberal multiculturalism. Within this regime indigenous communities were promised state structures that recognized their indigeneity as well as made promises to offer them social, economic, and political services to meet their unique collective needs. Speed begins by intervening this logic and stating that the current political moment is no longer characterized by neoliberal multiculturalism but rather by “neoliberal multicriminalism” where violence and corruption function to create “lawless states [that] are driven by profit motives in massive scale illegal economies that lack any reasonable regulation or protection of basic human rights” (Speed, 282-3). Neoliberal multicriminalism helps us understand how neoliberal states relinquish their citizens into market forces often at the expense of indigenous communities. This often forces indigenous communities to engage in a market economies that is does not serve them often leaving them in poverty and/or profoundly violent climates. This pushes indigenous communities to engage in “illegal” activities, thus, “illegality” becomes one of the only economies indigenous people are allowed into, increasingly annexing indigenous people as criminals at home and in the U.S. In other words a sort of settler-colonial grammar of illegality is created and rendered as a grammar that indigenous communities are a part of and composed by. Moreover, Guatemala as a settler-colonial state relies on pushing and exiling indigenous communities off of their land through social, political, and economic violence. They are often pushed into the spatial outskirts of the country forcing them to navigate remarkably dangerous and violent places and some are forced to migrate for safety and in search
of liberation. Once in the U.S, this migration is understood not as a survival mechanism but rather as a violation of immigration policy. Detention centers thus serve as institutions within a settler-grammar of place that give meaning to undocumented migrants as criminals, as we can see in the bodies of people like Rosalinda.

Speed also helps us understand how we might then extend the settler-colonial logic of place to questions of state recognition in the U.S and Guatemala. Neoliberal multiculturalism promised indigenous communities recognition and gave many hopes of rights within a larger neoliberal market. In reality, what this did was create structures that “served to keep people focused on the possibility of qualifying for state-sponsored rights, rather than engaging in struggles for potentially more just systems of governance” (Speed, 284). In other words, it created a false opportunity for inclusion which in fact only furthered the settler-colonial project at the expense of indigenous communities in Guatemala. The settler-colonial grammar of place that allows for experiences, like that of Rosalinda’s in detention, relies on the false hope of neoliberal multiculturalism. It also hinges on indigenous people relying on the legal regimes of the Guatemalan state and the U.S for recognition and liberation. In the case of Rosalinda, she relied on the false hope that the Guatemalan state would recognize her indigeneity and thus offer her social and political services. In the U.S she hoped to be recognized as a survivor, yet in both contexts the only thing that she was recognized was as a “criminal”– a narrative which has become interpolated by a settler-colonial grammar of indigenous communities in Guatemala and the U.S. In both cases, the settler-colony is sustained by the annihilation and displacement of indigenous bodies, and thus, asking for recognition from structures and systems that rely on one’s erasure and social death will often lead to very little inclusion and recognition, or liberation.
As follows, this lack of recognition continues within the detention centers. A lack of recognition within a settler-colonial grammar of place in detention creates an opportunity for a state of lawlessness within the centers. For example, although Rosalinda was being offered a court date and opportunity to petition for asylum in the U.S, under U.S law, she is considered an adult who can, and must, advocate for herself. This often means looking for legal aid, and that at ten years of age she must be able to understand her rights and the implications of signing any legal document or consenting to any possible pleas or outcomes. This raises the question of how much consent a ten year old can give in detention, who does not speak English, and who has very little knowledge of the U.S legal system. Aside from this, court materials including asylum petitions, were never translated into K’iche, only further violating her humanity and conceivably generating opportunities that might further marginalize her legally and politically due to a misinformation. In the context of a neoliberal multicriminalism, “illegality” continued the work of state repression abroad while simultaneously blurring the states participation in creating it to begin with. This also then obscured the states role in creating “illegality’s ultra violence” (Speed, 295) within a settler-colonial logic of place and law.

Furthermore, this settler-colonial grammar not only criminalizes Rosalinda, it also encourages us to read her experience of physical and sexual abuse in a vacuum; in many ways, decontextualizing this violence as part of a larger colonial genocidal project and its heavy reliance on the dispossession of indigenous women’s bodies. Speed further explains:

“Such violence does not take place in an historical vacuum...the ideological construction of indigenous women as violate-able has underpinned genocidal policies against indigenous peoples from colony through the modern state throughout the Americas” (Speed, 285).

Speed is referring to Guatemala’s civil war often referred to as la violencia (the violence). La violencia was a thirty-six year conflict beginning in 1960 and ending with the Peace Accords in
1996. La violencia was a blood bath of indigenous people. Throughout the conflict, the guerrilla rebels and military relied on tactics that directly affected indigenous women’s bodies. These tactics were genocidal acts of violence including but not limited to rape, sexual assault, and harassment, and psychological abuse. Moreover, we must understand Rosalinda’s experience of physical and sexual violence as an extension of the violence that occurred during the Guatemalan civil war and the colonial conquest of Guatemala in the 1500’s. Rosalinda’s story is a contemporary iteration of those legacies of colonial violence. Speed pushes us to understand domestic violence within a broader context of femicide because:

“formulating violence against women as purely interpersonal phenomena only serves to de-politicize gender violence. Individual or interpersonal gender violence cannot be understood outside of the historical and ideological structures that give rise to it and in which it is enacted” (Speed, 286).

In doing so Rosalinda’s experience is not a story simply about domestic violence. Her story is a story of settler-colonial state making, colonialism, and the terror that arises in creating a settler-colonial grammar of place.

To further understand and contextualize the violence experienced by Rosalinda at home and in the states I turn to Sherene Razack’s conceptualization of human surplus and human waste. Razack argues:

“To make and maintain their own emplacement in stolen land, settlers must repeatedly enact the mot enduring colonial truth: the land belongs to the settler, and Indigenous people who are in the city are not of the city. Marked as surplus and subjected to repeated evictions, Indigenous people are considered by settler society as waste or excess that must be expelled” (Razack, 24).

I extend Razack’s theory to help contextualize Rosalinda and her constant disposability. Rosalinda is marked as “in the city” but “not of the city” in Guatemala, constantly facing hardships whether that be economic, social, or political. Guatemala as a settler-colonial state is able to exist so long as Rosalinda’s body and that of indigenous communities is marked as disposable. In oth-
er words, this disposability is what creates a settler-colonial grammar that allows the state to disappear, dislocate, and exterminate indigenous people. This allows Guatemala to spatially marginalize indigenous bodies into the periphery thus creating a settler-colonial logic of place that is heavily influenced by social and political ideologies of worth and sub-humanity. In the U.S Rosalinda’s body becomes marked as surplus, figuratively and quite literally dumped into a detention center. Rosalinda is manufactured as surplus in multiple spaces. At home her indigenous body presents a threat to the settler-colonial state thus, she is constructed as human surplus and faced with societal inequalities including abuse and violence. In the U.S her body also poses a threat to the settler-colonial state and her disposability as an indigenous women serves to establish her humanity as surplus while also annexing her as criminal. I argue these detention centers are contemporary expressions of modernity and sites of waste disposal. I extent Razack’s following theory on “wasted human[s]” to further contextualize this:

“The production of ‘human waste,’ or more correctly wasted human (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant,’ that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of order, building” (Razack, 31-2).

The settler colonial grammar of place creates detention centers to serve as sites of waste disposal. The grammar that marks Rosalinda’s body–and bodies and experiences like hers– as waste makes room for the modern state to create physical spaces as sites of dumping. It begs the question: “how are modern subjects produced who can be excluded from the universal ‘without unleashing an ethical criss?’” (Razack, 61). Subjects like Rosalinda must be seen as “outside of the domain of justice” (Razack, 61) thus, their experiences of violence are not understood as violent because they are in ways evicted from their humanity and considered surplus and illegal. They
are wasted lives– and/or simply waste– and one cannot commit violence or terror onto something that is not human, on stolen land.

By tracing the settler-colonial grammar within Rosalinda’s experience in detention, I was able to make room to explore the generational consequences of this grammar. I turn to scholars like Asma Abbas who theorize love and the ramifications of trauma and suffering in how we love, and thus how we come to understand some of our most intimate facets of our beings. Rosalinda’s experience, I argue, is one of terror. In its specific form this terror is aligned with her body’s “increasing[ly] pulverizability, disposability and dislocation” (Abbas, 505). Rosalinda is constantly evicted and reproduced as marginal and surplus in Guatemala and the U.S. This constant reproduction creates a certain type of terror that Abbas argues becomes part of her being, and how she functions in the world daily. Abbas encourages us to understand this trauma as erupting from subjects– like Rosalinda– who have:

“survive[d] its own destruction, experiences all violence as catastrophe, and is moulded through this trauma rather than merely navigating it…’the new form is not that of life, but rather, a form of death” (Abbas, 506).

I am interested in tracing questions of how trauma informed from violence lives in the bodies of indigenous peoples on a daily basis. In understanding how terror produces trauma, and how trauma becomes a new form of life or as Abbas argues, death, we can begin to shed light to the ways in which trauma can, and has possibly affected some of Rosalinda’s most intimate sectors of life. Furthermore, exploring the ways in which we suffer and love and how trauma dictates and shapes these things offer the possibility of indexing “our political locations, defined [by] the spatial and temporal coordinates of our existence relate[d] to the bindings of state, society, and ideology” (Abbas, 503). I turn to love in many ways because I see it as an opportunity to intervene and disrupt the settler-colonial grammar of place, space, and trauma. Paying close attention
to how our existence is shaped by and informed from our experiences of violence and trauma due to colonialism, opens the door to possibly understanding how to disrupt a settler-colonial grammar of place and how one might be able to use love as a methodological approach thus possibly creating new opportunities for resistance, self-autonomy, and agency.

In tracing a settler-colonial grammar of place in the context of detention offers us the opportunity to view the logics of neoliberal multicriminalism which create corrupt and lawless governments, that are unable to offer basic rights to indigenous communities, thus leaving them at the hands of a very violent market force pushing them into poverty and abusive environments, within the public and private sector of life. People like Rosalinda and her family are forced to find alternative ways of surviving often times pushing them to immigrate to the U.S. Within the context of the U.S a settler-colonial grammar of place further extends a grammar of Rosalinda as criminal. This narrative lives within a broader context of “illegality” thus further extending the terror she faced at home in her new living environment. The narrative of Rosalinda as criminal is further interpolated by a settler-colonial grammar of indigeneity both in Guatemala and the U.S. This grammar isolates Rosalinda’s experience of sexual and physical abuse at home within a restrictive box of “domestic” and de-contextualizes its connections to genocidal violence erupting from colonial conquest and the Guatemalan civil war. Moreover, if we extend the logic of a settler-colonial grammar of place to also include how surplus humanity is created we can contextualize the detention centers as settler-colonial iterations of dumping sites. These sites become dumping grounds for the bodies of indigenous women and children and in this case Rosalinda, a ten-year old Mayan girl. Rosalinda is evicted, displaced, and violated at home and in the U.S and these consistent and persistent acts of violence beg us to ask what sort of trauma or ramifications this might have on her psyche and on her intimate being. Lastly, while tracing a settler-colonial
grammar of place helps us understand the larger genocidal and settler-colonial project, it also offers us a point of intervention. Understanding and exploring where trauma is rooted in offers an opportunity to explore different methodological approaches to resistance, self-autonomy, justice, and agency. Similarly to Abbas I turn to love in this, because when I look at children like Rosalinda who was so willing to tell me her story and to tell me she loved me because I could understand and translate her words, I’d like to think that epistemologically, indigenous love and resistance can offer a new entrance into healing work and re-work what a possible future can look like for children like Rosalinda and for people like me in the context of a settler-colonial grammar of place.
Bibliography:


