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Indigenous Erasure and Resistance in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

Indigeneity has, for the most part, been absent in literature on the Caribbean, even in decolonial writing. Writing on the Caribbean has often portrayed Indigenous people as extinct and thus irrelevant to contemporary life in the Caribbean. However, Indigenous peoples have played and continue to play a central role in Caribbean politics. This essay discusses how and why Indigenous people have been erased from discourse on the contemporary Caribbean. I argue that Indigenous erasure is a longstanding colonial tactic still used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Drawing on the case of the Maya peoples' struggle for land in Belize, I describe how Indigenous people resist colonial and capitalist violence. Having identified and historicized the myth of Indigenous erasure in the Caribbean, I sketch possibilities for shifting the discourse on the Caribbean to highlight rather than ignore the historic and ongoing contributions of Indigenous communities to the Caribbean. I suggest that diaspora and entanglement are two concepts that may help clarify the Caribbean's complex colonial histories in a way that underscores the importance of Indigenous peoples to the Caribbean.

I. Introduction

Indigeneity has largely been ignored in Caribbean literature, political discourse, and law. If Indigenous people figure in discussions on the Caribbean, they are usually only considered victims of Europe's imperial conquest. Portraying Indigenous peoples as relics from a pre-colonial past obscures the fact that many Indigenous communities have survived colonial genocide and continue to resist ongoing oppression. In this essay, I aim to answer the following questions: How and why have Indigenous peoples been erased from discourse on the contemporary Caribbean? How can we invalidate the myth that Indigenous people no longer exist in the Caribbean and highlight their continued resistance to colonial and capitalist violence? I will argue that Indigenous erasure is a longstanding tactic of colonial

domination entrenched in scholarship about the Caribbean, even in decolonial writing. I will highlight ongoing Indigenous resistance projects that remain central to Caribbean politics to undermine the imperial myth of Indigenous erasure. In addition, I will suggest that diaspora and entanglement are two concepts that can shift the discourse on the Caribbean to understand complex colonial histories better and foreground Indigenous peoples' continued presence in the Caribbean.

This essay proceeds in four parts. In part II, I historicize the myth of Indigenous erasure within Europe's colonial invasion of the Caribbean and explain how it remains salient in recent literature. I detail how anti-colonial scholarship often ignores or marginalizes Indigenous communities. In part III, I challenge the idea that Indigenous communities are non-existent or irrelevant to the modern-day Caribbean by describing how Indigenous communities work together to contest dispossession and harmful capitalist extraction. In part IV, I draw on Stuart Hall and Édouard Glissant to sketch how the concepts of diaspora and entanglement might reframe discourse on the Caribbean in a way that does not erase Indigenous peoples. Finally, in part V, I offer concluding remarks on dismantling the myth of Indigenous erasure.

II. Indigenous Erasure as Continuing Colonial Violence

The myth of Indigenous erasure began with Europe's colonization of the Caribbean. To take control of Indigenous lands, colonizers invoked the principle of *terra nullius*, meaning empty land or land belonging to nobody.[1] Colonizers declared they could claim ownership of Caribbean islands because these lands were unoccupied. Indigenous dispossession and erasure have always been central to Europe's imperial projects. [2] Colonizers dehumanized Indigenous peoples, describing them as soulless, subhuman beasts to justify stealing, enslaving, and killing their lands.[3] This colonial logic of doubting the humanity of Indigenous peoples to justify their dispossession, subjugation, and decimation constitutes "misanthropic skepticism."[4] Dispossessing and dehumanizing Indigenous peoples erase their histories and deny them their rights to life and land.

European colonizers committed genocide against Indigenous peoples and thus attempted to erase Indigenous knowledge and cultures; nevertheless, Indigenous people fought back, and some survived. Indigenous communities remain in the Caribbean, yet settler colonial governments deny their existence and disregard their rights claims. In the anglophone Caribbean, for instance, only Belize, Guyana, and Dominica recognize the rights of Indigenous communities in their national law.[5] The myth that Indigenous people are extinct is closely bound to the colonial idea that Indigenous people, their histories, and their land rights are insignificant. This myth has persisted—it bleeds into a contemporary discourse on the Caribbean, even anti-colonial discourse.

Caribbean thinkers, politicians, and activists have often ignored Indigenous peoples or reduced Indigenous history to colonial genocide, portraying Indigenous peoples as extinct. Melanie Newton observes that if Caribbean authors mention Indigenous peoples, it is often only to note that "Europeans murdered them all."[6] While recognizing Indigenous genocide is imperative, it is equally important to acknowledge the resilience of Indigenous peoples and their ongoing struggles against neocolonial capitalist extraction. Newton argues that the idea that Indigenous people no longer exist is a form of colonial knowledge and power that has infiltrated Caribbean scholars' anti-colonial projects.[7]

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[1] Filiberto Penados, Levi Gahman, and Shelda-Jane Smith, "Land, race, and (slow) violence: Indigenous resistance to racial capitalism and the coloniality of development in the Caribbean," *Geoforum* (2022): 8.

[2] Gabrielle Hosein, "Indigenous Geographies and Caribbean Feminisms," *Stabroek News*, 2017, https://www.stabroeknews.com/2017/04/10/features/indigenous-geographies-caribbean-feminisms/

[3] Penados, Gahman, Smith, "Land, race, and (slow) violence," 8.

[4] Ibid., 2.

[5] Melanie J. Newton, "Returns to a Native Land: Indigeneity and Decolonization in the Anglophone Caribbean," *Small Axe* 41 (2013): 108.

[6] Ibid., 118.

[7] Ibid., 109.

Hence, those writing in and about the Caribbean misstep when they fail to challenge the assumption that Indigenous violence is a thing of the past.

In *The Pleasures of Exile*, a series of essays on colonization and decolonization in the Caribbean, George Lamming refers to Indigenous people only once, describing them as part of a tragic, lost past: "indigenous Carib and Arawak Indians, living by their own lights long before the European adventure, gradually disappear in a blind, wild forest of blood."[8] Other prominent scholars of Caribbean history, including Sidney Mintz, C.L.R. James, and Eric Williams, offer valuable yet limited critiques of colonization because they ignore Indigenous peoples' role in the decolonial struggle.[9] My aim here is not to discredit the writers I have cited; they have generated profound insights into the workings of colonialism. Instead, I aim to reveal that the myth of Indigenous erasure is deeply entrenched in perceptions of the Caribbean—even in critical and revolutionary thought. Caribbean history has thus been marked by "aboriginal absence." As a result, Caribbean scholarship has implicitly forwarded the colonial, imperial, and capitalist aim of annihilating Indigenous peoples.[10]

On Newton's account, the descendants of enslaved people and indentured labourers transported to the Caribbean from Africa or Asia are often described as 'Indigenous' to the Caribbean. This misuse of Indigeneity occurs both in literature and in everyday discourse. Sylvia Wynter, for example, claims that Afro-Caribbean culture had "*become* indigenous" because pre-colonial Indigenous cultures were lost when the "Arawak Indians died out."[11] Here, Wynter wrongly reduces Indigenous peoples and cultures to historical relics, denying their continued presence in the Caribbean. According to Michelle Hosein, Caribbean people have claimed Indigeneity to assert their belonging to the region after years of being devalued under colonialism.[12] This misuse of Indigeneity, however, obscures Indigenous peoples' histories and their ongoing resistance to oppression.

The imperial myth of Indigenous erasure also underlies creolization theory. Caribbean scholars developed the notion of creolization to refute the colonial idea that Caribbeans are primitive and instead recast Caribbeans as modern people. This theory held that the mixture of African, European, and Asian cultures in the post-colonial Caribbean generated creole identities that afforded Caribbeans a modern, globalized subjectivity. Though creolization was a reclamation of power for descendants of enslaved people and indentured labourers, it implicitly excluded Indigenous peoples from modernity. Indigeneity is, in many respects, the antithesis of creolization. Following this theory, Indigenous people are not modern or relevant to the globalized world because they are not creolized.[13] Creolization thus further obscures Indigenous presence in the contemporary Caribbean.

III. Indigenous Communities' Ongoing Resistance

Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean have remained resilient despite neo-colonial violence. As Hosein writes, "Indigenous people didn't become extinct. They don't belong to a time past."[14] Indigenous communities resist colonial oppression, which takes shape today as the state-sponsored expropriation, privatization, and destruction of Indigenous lands for capitalist profit.[15] The land has always been and continues to be at the center of colonial violence.[16] The dispossession of Indigenous communities is a form of "structural violence" because it endangers Indigenous lives through neutral-seeming institutions, such as private property law.[17] These institutions normalize Indigenous precarity. Even though colonial violence is deeply entrenched in contemporary institutions and cultures, Indigenous peoples tirelessly struggle against dispossession.

A striking example of Indigenous resistance is the Maya Land Struggle in what is now known as Belize. Since

[8] George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 13.
[9] Newton, "Returns to a Native Land," 110.
[10] Ibid., 109.
[11] Ibid., 117.
[12] Hosein, "Indigenous Geographies and Caribbean Feminisms."
[13] Newton, "Returns to a Native Land," 111.
[14] Hosein, "Indigenous Geographies and Caribbean Feminisms."
[15] Ibid.
[16] Penados, Gahman, Smith, "Land, race, and (slow) violence," 1.
[17] Ibid., 3.

contact with colonial powers, the Q'echi and Mopan Maya peoples have fought to regain their lands and protect their livelihoods.[18] In the mid-1990s, the Belizean state granted corporations access to Maya lands for timber extraction.[19] Like in the colonial era, the state denied that the Maya people were Indigenous to Belize, thereby denying them their land rights. Misanthropic skepticism and the myth of Indigenous erasure were again at work for (neo-)colonial capitalist profit. In 2007, after many years of an arduous legal battle with the Belizean state, the Supreme Court of Belize recognized the Maya people as Indigenous and thus as bearing land rights. The court mandated that the state obtain the Maya community's informed consent before allowing corporations to develop on their land. The state, however, violated the court order to respect Maya land rights for 37 out of the 39 Maya communities.[20] After launching and winning another court case and subsequent appeals, the remaining 37 Maya communities won legal recognition of their right to ancestral lands. This case underscores that Indigenous communities continue to struggle against neo-colonial exploitation, and their relentless efforts yield essential gains. Moreover, this case demonstrates the strength of Indigenous governance systems and Indigenous nations' power when they stand in solidarity.

Indigenous peoples often band together to plan and carry out resistance projects because the oppressive states and corporations they oppose have abundant economic resources and political power. Hosein describes a conference titled "Indigenous geographies and Caribbean feminisms: Common struggles against global capitalism," which brought together women leaders from many Indigenous nations in the Caribbean, including Akawaio, Garifuna, Kalinago, Lokono Arawak, Macushi, Maho, Mopan Maya, Q'eqchi Maya, Wapichan, and Warrau First Peoples.[21] At the conference, these leaders discussed the possibilities for joining their local efforts to disrupt the capitalist, neo-colonial extraction that threatens their communities. In detailing this conference, Hosein highlights that Indigenous peoples are at the forefront of struggles against state projects to generate profit by privatizing water and clearing forests to make space for other development.[22]

Indigenous peoples are spearheading these battles against unsustainable capitalist extraction in part because they are disproportionately affected by climate change.[23] Rising sea levels, water shortages, and extreme weather events in the Caribbean have displaced many Indigenous peoples.[24] The economic subordination and political marginalization that Indigenous people have suffered since contact with colonizers has left Indigenous nations in the Caribbean with little land and few resources. This deficiency, in turn, made Indigenous people more vulnerable to the effects of climate change.[25] Indigenous sovereignty is, therefore, inextricably tied to climate change, among other justice issues.

The examples of Indigenous resistance I have sketched reveal that the myth of Indigenous erasure allows capitalist states and corporations to steal Indigenous lands, deplete their resources, and ultimately endanger Indigenous lives. These examples elucidate the pressing need to debunk the erroneous belief that Indigenous people no longer exist in the Caribbean and that colonial violence has ended. Indigeneity must be central in discussions on global capitalism, climate change, and the possibilities for creating a sustainable and just future. Anyone who lives on stolen lands and benefits from the destruction of Indigenous lives is responsible for working towards the end of colonial violence. A critical step in reducing the harm done to the Indigenous communities of the Caribbean is to disrupt the myth of Indigenous erasure. We must instead shift the discourse to

[18] Ibid., 4.
[19] Ibid., 5.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Hosein, "Indigenous Geographies and Caribbean Feminisms."
[22] Ibid.
[23] Beatriz Felipe Pérez and Alexandra Tomaselli, "Indigenous Peoples and climate-induced relocation in Latin America and the Caribbean: managed retreat as a tool or a threat?" *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 11, no. 3 (2021): 353.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Rose-Ann J. Smith and Kevin Rhiney, "Climate (in)justice, vulnerability and livelihoods in the Caribbean: The case of the indigenous Caribs in northeastern St. Vincent," *Geoforum* 73 (2016): 22.

highlight the centrality of Indigenous justice projects to contemporary Caribbean politics. This can be done, I argue, by reframing the Caribbean—its history and current state––using the concepts of diaspora and entanglement.

IV. Diaspora and Entanglement for Reframing the Caribbean

To close her essay on Indigenous absence in Caribbean anti-colonial writing, Newton identifies that diaspora has the potential to be a "liberating concept," and she sees a similar value in the idea of entanglement.[26] She does not, however, expand on how we might use these concepts going forward. Here, I will elaborate on the concepts of diaspora and entanglement and clarify their usefulness for dispelling the myth of Indigenous erasure.

The idea of diaspora conveys the dispersal of people from a homeland. The term is often associated with exile and forced migration, like the movement of slaves and indentured labourers from Africa and Asia to the Caribbean.[27] Writing from his experience as a Black Jamaican who lived in the Caribbean and the UK, Stuart Hall describes diaspora as a "scattering" that leaves migrants and their descendants unable to "ever [go] home in exactly the same way as you left it."[28] For Hall, diaspora produces hybrid cultural identities continuously "producing and reproducing themselves anew" through influences from the homeland and host land.[29] Hence, the diaspora does not essentialize Caribbean identities by claiming that Caribbean people retain an inherent African-ness at their core; instead, diaspora takes seriously that migration fundamentally alters our identity and worldview.

Reading the contemporary Caribbean through the concept of diaspora sheds light on the fact that Caribbeans with lineage to Africa or Asia are not Indigenous to the Caribbean, nor are they Indigenous to Africa or Asia. Instead, due to the Atlantic slave trade, they are diasporic people uniquely positioned between their homeland and host land. They cannot claim the host land as their own or return to an ancestral homeland. Diaspora thus offers a means of understanding and communicating the differences between Indigenous Caribbean people and Caribbeans with African or Asian heritage. Moreover, highlighting diaspora clarifies that not all those who moved to the Caribbean during the colonial era were responsible for Indigenous genocide. Distinguishing between Indigenous and diasporic Caribbeans is critical to dispelling the myth of Indigenous erasure. Framing the Caribbean population as diasporic opens the possibility of discussing the complexity of the histories of enslavement, including Indigenous peoples' historical and continued resistance to colonialism. Taking up the language of diaspora alongside Indigeneity creates a space for discussing the potential for collaboration between Indigenous communities and diasporic Caribbeans to decolonize the Caribbean and end capitalist exploitation. Furthermore, because diaspora challenges the rigidity of national borders, which often cut through Indigenous lands, diaspora is a subversive tool that can call into question the authority of the nation-state to control land and define belonging. Thinking through diaspora primes us to consider Indigenous peoples' rights to land and self-government critically.

Like diaspora, entanglement helps call attention to the Caribbean's colonial foundations and lasting impact on contemporary Caribbean society. Édouard Glissant puts forward the idea of entanglement in *Caribbean Discourse*. Recognizing the impossibility of returning to the homeland, Glissant argues that Caribbean people must "return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away."[30] The point of entanglement is, for Glissant, the Caribbean itself—its complex cultural and political history. Glissant uses entanglement to describe the Caribbean as a society formed through a mesh of Indigenous,

[26] Newton, "Returns to a Native Land," 119.

[27] Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the nation-state: from victims to challengers," *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1996): 507.

[28] Stuart Hall, "Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life," in *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 317.

[29] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 401.

[30] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 25.

African, Asian, and European cultures, thoughts, and languages. As a lens through which to read the contemporary Caribbean, entanglement foregrounds the region's complex and violent colonial history. At the same time, entanglement produces beauty and creative potential, and therefore it can act as a guiding principle for imagining a future free of exploitation.

Entanglement is a rejection of the misconception that colonialism is a phenomenon of the past that has no bearing on contemporary society. Suppose we return to the point of entanglement by drawing attention to the Caribbean's complex histories. In that case, we will be better positioned to understand that Indigenous peoples continue to be a vital part of the Caribbean's entanglement. To say that the Caribbean remains entangled is also to wrestle with the fact that Indigenous and diasporic Caribbean people can have conflicting needs and interests.[31] Taken together, diaspora and entanglement offer us a way of reconceptualizing Caribbean histories without erasing Indigenous communities' historical and ongoing resistance to colonialism.

V. Conclusion

In this essay, I have described the colonial tactic of claiming that Indigenous peoples are absent or extinct. Indigenous absence has persisted over time: scholarship on the Caribbean, even at its most revolutionary, has reinforced the idea that Indigenous peoples existed only before colonization and are irrelevant to present-day decolonial struggle. States continue invoking the myth of Indigenous erasure, denying Indigenous peoples' status and land rights to facilitate capitalist resource extraction. Indigenous peoples, however, resist this neo-colonial oppression, often collaboratively. Their projects to reclaim land intersects with climate justice because harmful extractivist practices are premised on Indigenous dispossession. Finally, I have suggested dismantling the myth of Indigenous erasure by reframing the Caribbean as a locale of diaspora and entanglement.

Shifting discourse on Indigeneity is necessary because the myth of Indigenous erasure continues to be taken up by states to justify dispossession; however, changing discourse only has limited effects on material and legal conflict. Even if we eradicate the myth of Indigenous erasure, land reform will remain rife with tensions. Indigenous communities must still appeal to the state to respect their rights to land, engaging with the state on its terms. If, as Hosein suggests, seeking recourse for Indigenous oppression through global institutions operated by the Global North, such as the UN, reinscribes rather than dismantles colonial relations, we face the challenge of finding better solutions that call state power into question. Though eradicating the myth of Indigenous erasure is not a panacea for Indigenous violence, it is essential for validating Indigenous rights claims. It must be accompanied by localized, community-based justice projects that support Indigenous sovereignty.

[31] Newton, "Returns to a Native Land," 121.

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