

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habitats

01/08

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 Elizabeth A. Povinelli
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Two imaginaries of space have played a crucial role in the emergence of liberalism and its diasporic imperial and colonial forms, and have grounded its disavowal of its own ongoing violence. On the one hand is the horizon and on the other is the frontier. These two spatial imaginaries have provided the conditions in which liberalism – in both its emergent form and its contemporary late form – has dodged accusations that its truth is best understood from a long history and ongoing set of violent extractions, abandonments, and erasures of other forms of existence, and have enabled liberalism to deny what it must eventually accept as its own violence. The horizon and the frontier: these two topological fantasies anchor the supposed world-historical difference between liberal governance, as a putative normative orientation and specific rule of law, and all other past and possible future forms of relationality. Let us tackle first the horizon as a *sine qua non* of liberalism's toxic inhabitation.

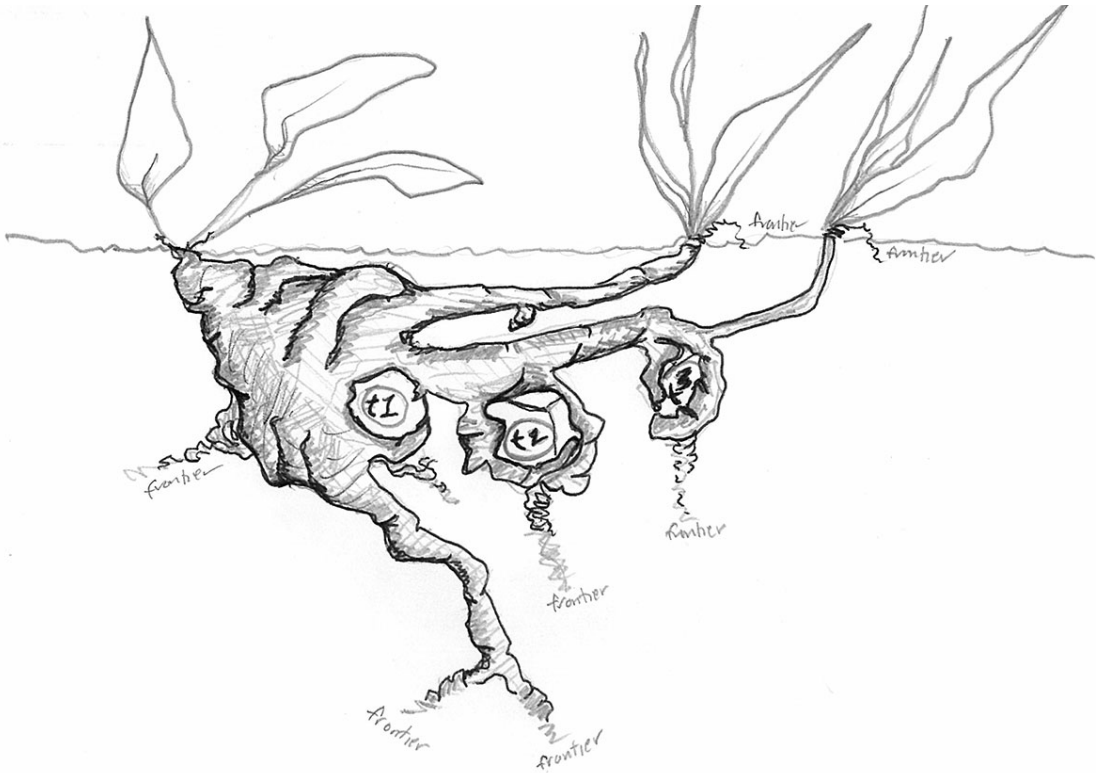
Ah, the horizon; Jürgen Habermas captures the hold it has on liberal reason: "Horizons are open, and they shift; we enter into them and they in turn move with us."¹ They might be historical horizons within one community, or the translational possibilities between two or more – both are where the truth of liberalism lies.² There are facts, as Habermas says, and there are norms. And it is in the norms, or in the measure between the facts and the norms, that liberalism claims its world-historical exception from other state forms of violence. But tell that to those who are subject to liberal facticity. They will respond that this ever receding vista of liberal norm is the liberal fact – indeed fact after fact shows no such norm exists in fact. Instead of a norm, the horizon is the deployment of a spatial imaginary to bracket all forms of violence as the result of the unintended, accidental, and unfortunate unfolding of liberalism's own dialectic. The use of portraits of indigenous peoples and black and brown bodies as mental and social savages that has justified the appropriation of lives, the extermination of bodies, and the destruction of lands: liberal apologies finally uttered in statements that describe these violent representations and actions as aberrations of its own ideals. The vicious absorption of entire worlds into the logics of liberal capitalism: the apology that it should have been done more gently and with more cultural and social sensitivity. Or as Christina Sharpe suggests, the liberal horizon is in fact the wake where African men, women, and children struggle to find possibility in the impossible after-space of the transatlantic slave trade, in which liberal capital claimed to be traveling toward a new ideal man.³

In *Economies of Abandonment*, I described

02/08



03/08



these worlds of existence that are forced to find their way in forsaken and disavowed liberal space between fact and norm as inhabitants of the brackets of late liberalism.⁴ For them the “accidents” and “exceptions” define liberalism when the horizon is withdrawn. For them the problem is not that they are not allowed to reach the norm but that there is no actual norm. Instead, the ideal-norm is what allows liberalism to act with impunity in the present, what allows liberalism to believe that its acts of violence are justifiable or unintentionally unjust. The cunning of recognition is one mode in which this maneuver unfolds.⁵ After decades of anti-colonial and radical social critique ripped apart the justificatory surface of liberalism’s claim to be sacking worlds in order to extend civilization, liberal recognition apologized and proclaimed its desire to hear and find worthy the massive crowds of existence that it had previously interned in the exception. And like neoliberal economics, liberalism shifted the burden of the care of the self away from itself and onto those it has already harmed, in a doublespeak that imposed a double bind onto the legally enunciative possibilities of others. *Just tell us your cultural and social values. Just don’t tell us anything that will actually threaten the “skeleton of principle which gives the body of our law its shape and internal consistency.”*⁶ This doublespeak double bind of recognition – this revised horizon of the Human – marks all others as *having been let in*. This mark genders and racializes the bodies of all excluded from the horizon of whiteness, a point Franz Fanon made long ago, and which has been more recently discussed by Denise Ferreira da Silva.⁷

In short, the horizon is not the End of a certain Man but a mechanism by which a specific violent history of some men is kept from ever landing. Even the Man doesn’t actually want to arrive in the land the horizon hopes for. If he lands he will be no different than any other form of existence. Worse, he thinks, he will be worse off without this simmering distinction he once had but has now lost. Others will not lose this fantasy, because it was never theirs. How quickly then do we see any announcement of an actual End of History excitedly announced to have been a mirage?⁸ The Spirit lives on, violently unfolding its own inner horizon temporally and spatially. Let us hitch a ride with Elon Musk to Mars my friends, to Mars. There we can once again disavow the toxic destruction of existence far away on a long-forgotten earth. And here we catch a glimpse of how the horizon can be easily transformed into a frontier. Thus it is not surprising to find liberal political theory speaking equally of justice, law, science, and social difference as both horizon and frontier. Both are

the *toward-which* the spirit of a certain kind of man soars, powered by fear of the toxicity he has produced and left behind in so many sacked worlds.⁹ And thus we come to the frontier and its dynamics.

The frontier has, of course, a specific linguistic and social etiology, dating from the fifteenth-century French word of the same spelling, referring to the place where two countries meet, the abutting edges of sovereign lands. Later the frontier would be absorbed into Anglo diasporic discourse and law as the contested space between civilized and uncivilized natures and cultures. Thus the frontier moved, in discourse, from a space between two sovereign powers to the space between civilization’s sovereignty and the terror of barbarity. It is where the sovereignty of civilization might be upended by other nonsocial imaginaries. No matter Foucault’s partition in the modes of governance (sovereignty on the one side and discipline and biopolitics on the other) – it matters little what form liberal governance takes when it peers over the horizon of the colonial frontier. Nor does it matter whether we use Schmitt’s marking of 1492 as the date when the *nomos* of the world emerged as Europe used various flags to territorialize the earth, or whether we insist that it was only with the globalization of neoliberal capitalism that this global *nomos* settled in. In all of these cases, what matters for those on the other side of liberalism’s claim that it acts violently only when civilization is at stake, or only when it is mistaken in its understanding of the cultural and social qualities that exist on the other side of the frontier, is that a power is seeking to advance an ever larger territoriality of rule.

It is the view from the other side that first critiques the sovereign, his sovereign powers, and its ancient theorists – Jean Bodin, Hugo Grotius, and Thomas Hobbes. And it is from spaces such as Critical Indigenous Theory that a demand for an exit route from more modern theorists, such as Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, can be imagined. Western political theory has used sovereignty figures to create the frontier in discourses of law and discovery, of war and expansion, of empire and its liberation that in turn transform space into a contest between the rulers or a contestation between the ruled and the unruly. In both frontiers the physics of this megalomaniacal vision of sovereign expanse across a frontier is Newtonian. It is the physics of bodies at rest or motion, of opposing forces, of equal and opposite reactions. But between rulers the frontier should be a border where reactions should end, where the politics of peace should reign. Once the war has been won, the frontier secured, the politics of sovereign peace keeps all

04/08

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 Elizabeth A. Povinelli
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bodies in their proper place. All bodies that oppose internal rule are the disruptors of peace, terrorists. Thus terrorists can come from anywhere, from the middle, the edges, from nowhere. They create strange interior frontiers – the slum and the ghetto, the internet and the whistle-blower – because the frontier emerges whenever borders are punctured or perforated, are not secured or recognized.

Even a secure border between rulers is a notional frontier not only because, no matter how precise the demarcation, some material space must hold the demarcating difference between here and there and between them and us, but also because a border and frontier are effects and affects of a specific political theology – a belief that absorbed the realm of the divine into the function of the lawful border. A worldwide territorial order had a heavenly seal, a spirit of justice with its own centers, peripheries, and frontiers. Thus Haiti could be within France, and yet where the application of the rights of man were concerned, it was a frontier. The British could massacre and mourn those who were in the Americas and Australia before it arrived with its right to create a sovereign order over a lawless expanse. And the Monroe Doctrine allowed the US to declare frontier spheres within spheres within spheres of its own domination. The sovereign law decides what is border and what is frontier, when one becomes the other, when the energies accumulating in the space where two bodies are pressing against each other should be bracketed or liberated so once again opposing forces and reactions can be set in motion. There is no left or right to this model. There is only this position against that – your space and time against mine.

Many theorists have struggled to describe the space on the other side of the frontier – whether internal or external, whether spaces emerging in the wake and the brackets of recognition – as containing within them something other than an immanent sovereignty. How finally to think power and space without frontiers and horizons? Perhaps the most widely embraced answer has been to think with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. After all the rhizome, in form and dynamic, as Deleuze and Guattari argued, is a decentered network analytically exploring space as a method of unfolding itself: "Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions ... the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature."¹⁰ Karen Barad sees the rhizome as allowing a quantum

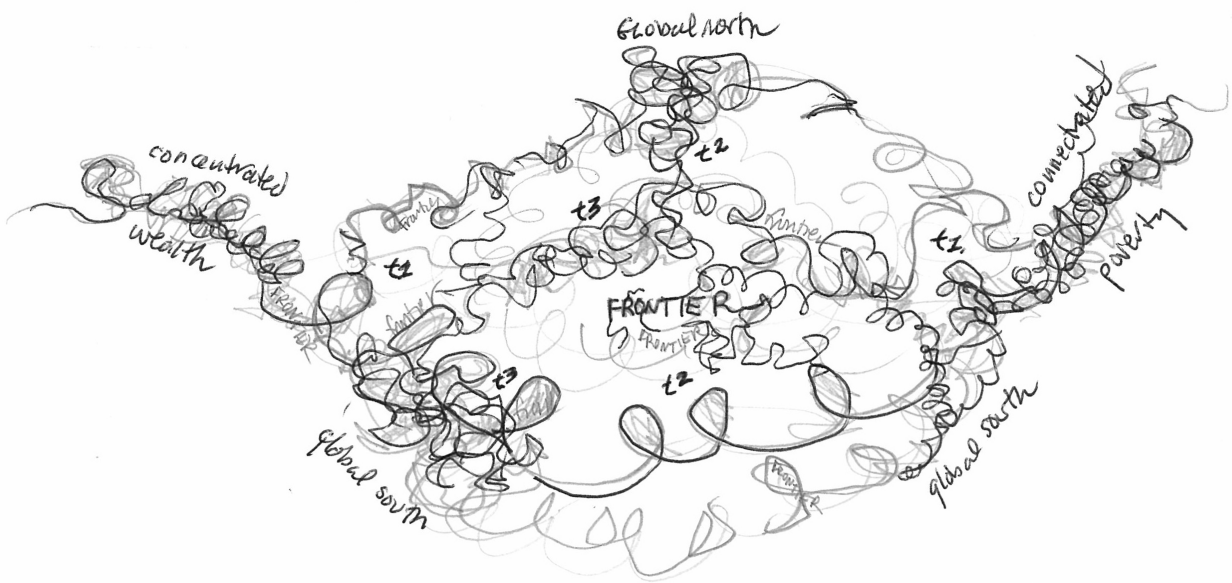
understanding of political and ethical rule.¹¹ The rhizomatic frontier is organic, mechanic, and quantum – a hunk of ginger and swarming ants; the internet; the "now you see it and now you don't" nature of Schrödinger's cat. The root can be broken, the nest scattered, data routes closed, objects disturbed by quantum logics. But each will start again – the root now has two separate surfaces through which it can reconstitute and expand itself; the ants set off in search of new crevices; the hacker opens portals; the cat grins. The rhizome does not mind the lattice because it provides a condition for spatially unfolding. Put anything in its way and the rhizome simply alters its shape. It absorbs its surroundings and becomes something else without remorse. It is not cruel but it is without guilt or shame. The rhizome is not what it is but the multiplicity of its potential becomings. The frontier is merely the nature of its own self-unfolding. Some believe that this becoming makes the rhizomatic frontier a space of radical motion. In stark contrast to the sovereign and its frontier, the motion of the rhizome is "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states."¹²

But perhaps we should not rush too quickly past the amnesia of the rhizome – the fact that it doesn't remember where it started or where it is going. It just goes. This thing, this motion without memory or remorse, can suffocate what it encounters as systematically as the sovereign at the frontier – even other rhizomatic forms, motions, and dynamics. What in the concept of the rhizome keeps us from thinking of settler colonialism as rhizomatic? In 1492 a Protestant rhizome, cleaved from a fibrous unfolding Christian European bulb, floated to the Americas and began the process of its own reterritorializing. This settler rhizome happily threw off its previous form and declared its new becoming, a liberation from anything past, a new Jerusalem, a mode of sociality that was relentlessly everywhere and anywhere, and without remorse. It dug in and changed the nature of the ecology. Like invasive ants it took advantage of scraps of food offered or left behind. Newtonian physics did not phase it. Every event of opposition provided an opportunity for a swarming. It surrounded what impeded it and declared the new form to be of its own making. What in the rhizome makes it one side or another in the endless game of espionage and counterespionage, insurgency and counterinsurgency? Nothing; it has no sides in the sense of a sovereign border. Hackers happily hitch a ride on mom and pop businesses, international corporations, or state agencies. The

05/08

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 Elizabeth A. Povinelli
Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habitats

06/08



US National Security Agency turns to hackers to hack a terrorist's phone. The frontier is wherever an opportunity for movement is afforded.

Édouard Glissant long ago noted as much, distinguishing between forms of rhizomatic rooting. It is not rooting per se that presents the problem, but totalitarian rootings and the overdetermined conditions of nomadism:

Take, for example, circular nomadism: each time a portion of the territory is exhausted, the group moves around. Its function is to ensure the survival of the group by means of this circularity. This is the nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, by the Arawak communities who navigated from island to island in the Caribbean, by hired laborers in their pilgrimage from farm to farm, by circus people in their peregrinations from village to village, all of whom are driven by some specific need to move, in which daring or aggression play no part. Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.¹³

But “the Huns, for example, or the Conquistadors” perfected an “invading nomadism” whose goal was to “conquer lands by exterminating their occupants.”¹⁴ As if they were the advanced runners of a spreading plague from which they believe themselves to be immune, “conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people.”¹⁵ These followers would root down into the charred landscape, claiming it as property, fencing and commodifying it in a new form of conquest – the conquest of private cultivation.

Of course the conquerors were not immune. As Glissant's fellow Martiniquean, Aimé Césaire, wrote, the virus would soon turn and consume them, but not before much else of the world had been lost: “Each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread” and the poison seeps “into the veins of Europe” such that “slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*.”¹⁶ This savagery began and continues against forms of existence that are thrown over the other side of the frontier, thrown overboard as the privileged steam toward the horizon. These are overwhelming brown and black bodies, the subaltern and the indigenous, interned in the brackets of recognition. Thus it is not the sovereign or the rhizome that matter but

the mode and purpose of the movement, the presuppositions about how forms of existence are related to each other, are fashioned from within each other. The goal is to not become a state in the face of an invading state. It is to not grab an anthropologist to act as your diplomat across ontological and cultural borders. Indeed, diplomats create state-effects – they create the state they claim to be speaking on behalf of in global meetings. Pierre Clastres registered an ongoing refusal on the part of his interlocutors among the Guayaki in Paraguay to not become a state simply as a reaction to being confronted by a colonizing one.¹⁷ Contemporary critical theorists like Audra Simpson, Glen Coulthard, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson have amplified a formation of human and nonhuman belonging that refuses the frontier options – to be a sovereign state against other sovereign states or to be the unruly frontier of a sovereign expansion.¹⁸

Across all of these works the question it is not Newtonian or quantum physics, nor the confrontation between two equal or unequal forces, nor the unrooted movement of infelicitous unfoldings (nor of militant fidelity to specific movements or confrontations). The question is how routes and worlds and how extimate existences are enhanced or sacked by forms and imaginaries of movement. How does this thickened space come to force other regions to conform to its way of existing? What kinds of trailings, seedings, separations, and connections are left along the way as entire infrastructures pull stuff back and forth? How compacted is the material? What embankments are formed in the process? Where does the stuff of these embankments come from? What indentations are left behind? Europe did not predate the history of its multifaceted and violent dispossession of other modes of existence. Europe was not a value that spread or failed to spread its message globally. As W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon argued, Europe, and by extension the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, etc., built itself from externalizing its expansion into and onto the bodies of others. It ate up and shat out others elsewhere than it claimed to be. The Congo was not in the Congo but in the shiny streets of Brussels; Congolese spirits haunt the streets of Europe, built as it is from their lands, bodies, and worlds. As Aileen Moreton-Robertson points to in her reading of Critical Indigenous Theory against Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies, the modality by which race was used to exterminate and dispossess actual native peoples provided one condition for another modality in which different black and brown people were dispossessed of their bodies

07/08

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 Elizabeth A. Povinelli
Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habitats

to labor for others. Thus a differential but shared relationship exists between the extractive machinery of Western privilege and the epistemologies and ontologies that legitimate this privilege. And it is within these spaces that a refusal to be either horizon or frontier continues.

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All drawings by the author.

08/08

e-flux journal #90 — april 2018 Elizabeth A. Povinelli
Horizons and Frontiers, Late Liberal Territoriality, and Toxic Habitats

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