

5. What Are Politics?

There's no question that the idea of a borderless world appeals to some quixotic impulses. A time without borders sounds like freedom, or something akin to it. No more passports, no more detention camps, no more expulsions and deportations, no more ICE or Brexit, no more putatively decent people pushing boats of starving refugees back into the sea.

But any instigation of borderlessness is perilous. The market fundamentalism of neoliberalism loves the elimination of trade barriers as its own form of borderlessness. Late capitalism cheers the freeing of corporate flows of capital through and across nation-states for transnational accumulation, but aggressively denies that same freedom of movement to people. That version of borderlessness leaves most of us trapped in confounding spiderwebs of capture.

Where there is a border, there is always a political community in flux – never fully formed, never solidified and whose membership is liquid and prone to the possibility of suspension, dissipation, and possible exile – all in the name of fixity and solidity. The production of inferiority creates constant unabating anxiety about whether one deserves to be there or not, whether a knock on the door or a phone call will turn one's life upside down. It is a characteristic of the permanent state of order and disorder where one's status can always be taken away.

Crises of ecology and economy have inevitable inertias that lead to extreme localism as a possible intervention to global capital flows and domestic inequalities. Calls for direct democracy and organic forms of decision-making have populist appeal on the left and right. The calls for

economic nationalism at a broader scale against global capital can tie disaffected populist voters with progressives, anarchists and socialists in a shared critique of the state.

The local place versus the rootless cosmopolitanism evoked by the *somewhere* versus *anywhere* articulations of political community mobilizes resentment of the individualizing brutality of hollowed-out neoliberal economies. Those who are exiled from somewhere to anywhere, cast out by economic flows, or the reverse, are hardly beneficiaries in this violent binary.

In this context, the politics of belonging that tie these disparate strands of environmentalism, planning and retreatist localism together in its complacently Western form is the most pernicious of identity politics that cuts across class boundaries – whiteness. But it is also mobilized in new nationalist and majoritarian forms from India to Turkey to China to Yemen to Brazil, constructions that reach beyond white nationalisms and into new forms of racial-religious belonging.

When we consider bare life and the social relations of inequality that shape these conditions of belonging and expulsion, we have to consider the broader question of human and more-than-human, moving beyond the anthropogenic threshold. Self-preservation is increasingly bound to the more-than-human at a planetary level. To move beyond the limited scope of the self, to see shared flourishing as a precondition of the political, and to then extend that to the more-than-human, raises the stakes of pre-emptive miscommunication. What is at stake is a present-day being-togetherness that has the capacity to be a form-of-life – one that has the capacity to resist the inequities of the world as it is, but refuses a unity at every step.

We are bound by the possibility of a community that has the capacity to both deny and overthrow power. This is not to name an enemy to stand against but must, by its very possibility to form and cohere, be an affirmative construction that can overcome the limits of its threshold. The line can never be clearly demarcated – it is intended to be amorphous, dangerous, contradictory, porous, leaving traces of an inside and an outside, borderless but stubborn, refusing to be enemies.

Through friendship, both inside and outside are forced into new relations. These are not fixed, frozen relations, but malleable, open to disagreement, disarray, dissipation and with the possibility of concretizing affect in the realm of the public and the intimate. To be-together in friendship is simultaneously an articulation of freedom and duress. It is the place of gossip, teasing and tenderness of being close and being closed – a relation without purpose, but moments away from the possibility of mobilization and/or dissolution, and a constructed purpose from without. In our estimation, this is the best rendition of ‘the political’.

Politics that are bound by the friend-enemy distinction are disastrously limited – at their most banal, they become management of borders and exercises of sovereignty and jurisdictions. Politicizing politics needs to rest on a much more nuanced set of relationships – friendship as one possible route and one we all have experience with in the everyday – politics as negotiation, compromise, consent, argument, and agreement.

In ‘The Murmuration of Birds: An Anishinaabe Ontology of Mnidoo-Worlding’ Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning asks what a bird sees when it is flying in a flock, in a murmuration. How do starlings turn apparently suddenly, but all together without colliding, how do they create these beautiful, interweaving, cascading patterns without ever getting in each other’s way, running into one another, how do they know how to move? She calls this an “all-encompassing and interpenetrating mnidoo co-responsiveness”:

The result is a resistance to cooption that concedes to the heterogeneity of being. I define this murmuration, that is, this concurrent gathering of divergent and fluctuating actuation/signals as mnidoo-worlding. Mnidoo-worlding entails a possession by one’s surroundings that subsumes and conditions the possibility of agency as entwined and plural co-presence.¹

¹ Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning, “The Murmuration of Birds: An Anishinaabe Ontology of Mnidoo-Worlding,” in *Feminist Phenomenology Futures*, Eds. He-

This ‘plural co-presence’, like every sophisticated rendition of heterogeneity/gathering is almost unthinkable in the context of colonial fixities.

When community is contained with borders – nationalist or otherwise – any creative instabilities are occluded behind a veil of imagined fixity and ethno/racial/religious ordering. If we are going to assert that the political is necessarily non-processual and non-teleological, then identity and affect require one another, stitching together intersectionality and assemblage as ‘convivial modes of thought’. Intersectionality ruptures dead-end forms of political closure and becomes porous and inconsistent at the moment of exposure. We are curious about the origins of power that can break the bonds of community and undermine the tenuous, sinewy capacity to resist. Proximity to others can mean helping hands or choking one’s breath away.

If one of the origin points of being-together is to preserve collective life, can this be done without the border? The stranger is someone we do not know but may be open to. The intruder/stranger is named and can never be welcomed, forever banished, shunned and in exile within and without. Pluriversalities and emancipatory political struggles are attempts to redraw this link as the basis for a community organized around the possibility of a political outside, which also has a solidaristic motivation to the more-than-human. But power and authority still have the capacity to authorize, designate, decide, index and overwrite the political force of any given community.

Identity and politics intersect where the filtering, sorting and designation of people by passport becomes the most rudimentary inscription. Moving towards dehumanist solidarities is to democratize relations with the human and the more-than-human simultaneously outside of mastery. Politics is engaging in a deliberate composition of the future beyond colonial exhaustions.

The strain and tension of friendship gives texture and character to the capacity for this futural orientation. Politics is a movement to stand

up on one's own and build community in the realm of exposure with the other. Politics is where human implication with the more-than-human requires constant uncertainty, social volatility, contingencies and accidents. This is to build a dialectical relationship that brings the more-than-human to a site of exposure where radical democracy and justice can be contemplated. Politics is reimagining the contours of community beyond territorial bounds and technological apparatuses, and actively willing oneself into the uncertainties and instabilities and compromises of exposure.

Resisting any unified accounts of the universal human allows us the specificity that is imperative in understanding the relation to exposure and other forms of life. It is part of the stretching, elasticity and plasticity required to shape a future world collectively. If democracy means anything at all as a site of the political, it is always already a democracy-to-come, one that includes all of us, everyone outside the bounds of legibility, human and the more-than-human, bound up in our very capacity to think the future together.

The ongoing production of inferiority fuels the machine of colonialism. We need to reimagine the composition of politics beyond an anthropomorphic straitjacket. The inevitable movement of politics is to do away once and for all the false division of beings who act and those who are acted upon. The violence and authoritarianisms that attempt to establish order are a symptom of the reactionary void and wound.

If we reduce politics to the State form, to the defense of the sovereign, we can only reduce ourselves to nationalist jingoism that rudely undermines the possibilities of being-together. The most durable route to community has to be through a politics of exposure, to do away with domination as mode-of-life and imagine a present and future as new relations. The political is the will to life and the movement of choosing living over surviving.

