

BAJO EL CORAZÓN DEL CIELO<sup>1</sup>:  
SIX SOLILOQUIES ON *THE MAKING OF INDIGENEITY*

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*The Making of Indigeneity: Curriculum History and the Limits of Diversity*  
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We all know the Indians were colonized by the Europeans, but every colonized Indian has  
been colonized by the Indian reaction to colonization.  
—Sherman Alexie, *A Native Son with No Borders*

Crow flies around the reservation  
and collects empty beer bottles  
but they are so heavy  
he can only carry one at a time.  
So, one by one, he returns them  
but gets only five cents a bottle.  
Damn, says Crow,  
redemption is not easy.  
—Sherman Alexie, “Crow Testament”

0.

I cannot say for sure whether it was chance or divine intervention. On a Tuesday afternoon, I sat in my office to read Ligia López’s engrossing accounts about the “pedagogifixation” of *lo indigena* in Guatemala when the following news flashed on the screen of my phone:

Sen. Elizabeth Warren’s heavily promoted DNA test showing she likely has some Native-American ancestry ended up handing more fodder to Republican critics, who pointed out the test results indicate she could actually have less Native-American

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<sup>1</sup> In the Mayan Cosmology, compiled and systematized in texts written post-Hispanic occupation, Heart of the Sky [Corazón del Cielo] is viewed as the source of all creation.

heritage than the average European American. Meanwhile, President Trump on Monday afternoon added new conditions to his earlier offer to donate \$1 million to a charity of her choice if she took a DNA test as part of a debate challenge. "I'll only do it if I can test her personally," the president told reporters while touring Hurricane Michael's damage along the Gulf Coast. "That will not be something I will enjoy doing either." (Singman, 2018)

The simultaneous encounter between *The Making of Indigeneity* (2018) and "Warrengate" struck me as a type of singularity. Which is to say, I felt compelled to look at *lo indígena* as a constant in history, "an immediate anthropological trait ... an obviousness [that] imposed itself uniformly" to me (Foucault, 1996, p. 277). On the screen, I had the reiteration of an old cultural script, at once familiar and uncanny. In the west of Jerusalem, we witness, daily, whether we are aware of it or not, this mobilization of *lo indígena* as a property of someone else's time. And perhaps more perniciously, Western science allows for particular claims to be made about indigeneity, which is now supported by DNA tests commercially available to citizens. Society's hunger for commoditized identities in late-capitalism indeed appears insatiable.

The entanglement between López's narrative and Warren's claims of indigenous kinship sent me into a spiral, a rabbit hole-of-sorts in which mythologies emerged at a disconcerting speed magnifying a not-so-hidden dimension of indigenous bodies that have been projected *in* and *for* education.

*La cuestión indígena.*

*Lo indígena.*

That which is indigenous.

Words mattering worlds.

Words stringed in veins

Running through the body of the nation.

And *El cuchillo* keeps on cutting and cutting and cutting.

The wounds left behind by colonial histories, however, remain wide open because stories cut deep, especially stories that subsume collective experiences under evocative expressions such as "we/they, the people." I am speaking here, in particular, about the erasure of differences that have marked *lo indígena's* articulation as a question: What is indigeneity? And more importantly, perhaps, what have our performances of indigeneity done to indigenous peoples? In what follows, I would like to engage with several aspects of López's vertiginous excavation of *lo indígena* to better understand the performative consequences of *lo indígena's* curricularization.

My engagement with López's text will materialize itself to you in six loosely connected soliloquies, each reflecting analytical instances in her work that I find insightful and helpful to interrogate what decolonizing indigenous education might look like in a present yet to come. Aesthetically, I aim to reflect the nurturing and imaginative scholarship López envisions for indigenous studies as she zooms in and out of archives that have constituted *los indígenas* as we can know them.

## 1.

Institutionalized multicultural curricula have attempted to introduce corrective measures to counteract the pernicious forms of imagining indigeneity that more often than not turn *lo indígena* into a sort of totem. This totem, however, continues to be part of a managerial technology that enables a willful ignorance towards indigenous questions not pertinent to a distant, mythical past. Indeed, more often than not, the interests of education serve a master interested in maintaining *lo indígena's* “no-body” status quo. The lump-summing of people under this one rubric (*lo indígena*) facilitates the comfortable notion that identity can be managed, easily explained. If we turn *indígenas* into *lo indígena*, exclusions and inclusions are inevitably easier to justify. At the level of enunciation of *lo indígena*, the formula, if we think about it, is quite simple:

*Lo + adjetivo; ej., lo (in)diferente, lo obscuro, lo indeterminable, lo (im)posible, lo improbable.*

Manyfold are the implications of the enregisterment of *el/la indígena* as *lo indígena*: the Achi, Akatek, Chuj, Ixil, Jakalteq, Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, Poqomam, Poqomchi', Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', Tz'utujil and Uspantek, to name a few, are subsumed under one sign “lo.” The incommensurability of what we bring to bear as part of *lo indígena* as a curriculum, however, imposes limits to what *lo indígena* can be. Once archived in schools, the signs of *lo indígena* come to signify the nation as a subsuming force. As López remarks, “the nation continues to be the trustworthy organizer of educational aspirations from the so-called far left to the far right. Interestingly, and paradoxically enough, the nation necessitates those who define it and those who are not in it, to draw imaginary borders” (López, 2017, p. 149). Put differently, we can only imagine an “inside” if we inevitably think about exclusions. And the terms for negotiating inclusions and exclusions are never clear-cut, with the arc of justice bending more often than not towards those who have managed to gather more power and define difference and justice on their own terms (Barros, 2016; 2018).

In this sense, by exposing the inventive discourses related to indigenous subjectivities-in-the-making, *The Making of Indigeneity* cuts across a labyrinthine amalgam of narratives that have conspired to transform *lo indígena* into a site of presumptuous queries and “rights” to knowledge. López’s scholarly senses attune to the ways in which educationalists continue to carry around *lo indígena* as an artifact of Western curiosity. Faces and facts collected throughout the centuries and neatly arranged in “griefcases” to suit the scholarly pursuit of someone else’s truth shedding light into the consequences of such actions. When carried vainly, these “griefcases” signal a type of virtuous liberal thinking advanced without the necessary radicalization of democratic values. In instances when interests might be pure, one wonders whether the knowledge of the depths of someone else’s wounds, carried in academic “griefcases,” can accomplish much given settler colonial states’ technologies used to shape institutions as limiting instruments of what is possible to see as a life worth living.

In López’s archeological excavations of the ruins of modern educational discourses, we are taken to sites where the Borgean Aleph makes itself known to us through the cracks of educational discourses. Dizzy and disconcerted by the contradictions of these discourses, we

stare at *lo indígena's* narrative through fissures. And because of these fissures, I can't help but read López's work as an aesthetic intervention in literacy and curriculum debates informed by institutional technologies centering *la cuestión indígena* as if literacy itself were a gift of Western Enlightenment to be bestowed upon the so-called Third World. Throughout her readings of teacher preparation policies, qualitative accounts, poems, historical documents, and photographs, cracks appear. And like Borges' protagonist in the short story *The Aleph*, we find ourselves staring at a complex collection of good and not so good intentions advanced on behalf of indigenous peoples' education:

At first, I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on Earth and none of them reflected me. (Borges, 1971)

Like Borges's transcendental musings about the fabric of reality, López's inquiry refuses to accommodate conventional research techniques to make what is indigestible more palatable to scholarly traditions' sensitivities. "Adapt your aspirations to our ends—or else" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 64) is an academic mandate that López greets with a resounding "no." For creativity of any kind, including scholastic, requires liberating the senses to imagine history and ideas about *lo indígena* moving to the sound of multiple beats, in several directions at once, obeying and rebelling against the push and pull of political forces that bring certain truths to bear while conveniently disregarding others. Indeed, throughout the pages of *The Making of Indigeneity*, historical time appears to move in ways resembling the methodological techniques employed by historians of the impossible. Take, for instance, Gabriel García Márquez's words about the foundation of Macondo:

Years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them, it was necessary to point. (Márquez, 2014, p. 1)

In the opening lines of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, we see Márquez alluding to labeling, sorting, and categorizing as practices associated with the colonial imprint, the Western mark of Cain inherited by indigenous' and othered communities. Before colonialism, "the world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them, it was necessary to point." The resulting experience of literacy's development could be no other than the practice of a perennial form of exile encapsulated and exemplified through phenomena such as the utterance of *lo indígena*. Once recohered and repurposed to serve imperialism's and nationalism's logics, the colonized became "indigenous," therefore reacting to colonization by

becoming the Indian. Let me explain what I mean here by weaving into this conversation about *The Making of Indigeneity* a particular account that recently came to my attention.

In 2018, when students in the sprawling San Juan School District in Utah gather every morning to recite the pledge of allegiance, they place their right hands over their hearts and recite the text in their ancestral Navajo language. Two centuries of schooling have provided them with plenty of reasons not to honor the American flag this way. Yet, to date, no student has opted out of the ritual. Unisonous, they utter the Pledge of Allegiance as if in a gesture of incantation bringing the nation to be as we can possibly know it, through statements:

To the Sacredness of Our Flag. From the land of the 50 United States of America. We pledge our allegiance to God and our flag. It stands for hope and compassion. We stand united as People of all cultures on our beloved land. We are preserved by the power of peace and harmony. (Zito, 2018)

The pledge of allegiance in the Navajo language above projects probable and improbable fantasies of kinship under the rubric of national solidarity. One nation (whose nation?) remains under God. The expression of the translation of a nationalistic text suggests a strange political compromise inasmuch as it gestures towards an accommodation to what liberalism and nationhood predicate, in fact, demand in the name of a questionable expression of citizenship. But if we aggregate the existences of this pledge of allegiance in Navajo, Warrengate, and similar events symbolizing nationness, we might see just how curricula can work to establish an insidious semiotic chain that predisposes us to acquiesce to a willful illusion perpetuating colonialism's bidding. Once again, Alexie's verses come to me as a rejoinder to what western values have imposed as literacy under economic developmentalism's and nationalism's ideals:

"Damn, says Crow,  
a million nests are soaked with blood." (Alexie, 2000)

2.

When the Portuguese arrived  
under the hell of a stormy weather  
They dressed the Indians  
What a pity!  
Had it been a sunny morning  
The Indians would have undressed  
The Portuguese instead.  
— "Portuguese mistake," Oswald de Andrade<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quando o português chegou / Debaixo de uma bruta chuva / Vestiu o índio / Que pena! / Fosse uma manhã de sol / O índio tinha despido / O português. (de Andrade, 2003, p. 93)

*The Making of Indigeneity* speculates on several equivocations that have been taken as commonsensical in educational policies and that echo the spirit of de Andrade's verses quoted above. For in our belief that what we do in the name of the future is righteous (dressing the *indio*), we may end up doing more harm than good, especially if we let go of notions of present-ness and decide to live for a future we cannot control. Yet, as López (2017) maintains, "the future can only emerge as a prophecy in playfulness" (p. 121).

Indeed, playfulness as an aesthetic and rhetorical strategy allows López to interrogate what our "doing education" has done to subjectivities compiled under the sign of *lo indígena*. López's decolonial inquiry restlessly pursues the de-linking of the bits of knowledge about the indigenous lifeworld and praxes that have constructed indigenous otherness within a developmentalist disposition framing illiteracy as a "spreadable disease" (Kirkendall, 2010). Yet, López's excavations of the historical discourses informing *lo indígena* as a problem refuse to partake in traditional illiteracy anthems calling for the surrendering of the self-determination of marginalized peoples to Western logocentrism. In playfulness, López manifests *lo indígena* as a futuristic project illuminating viable alternatives for making indigeneity present as an immanent curriculum. This curriculum will be possible, of course, only insofar as we are willing to let go of the notion of literacy as an uninterested gift of the West (which shouldn't be read as denying literacy as a human right.) In this regard, López's accounts of Guatemalan educational discourse foreground the concurrence of stories, arguments, and doxas often ignored by Eurocentered languages pursuing reliability, validity, and reproducibility as goals for life's management.

Setting aside the linear practice of time engendered by research technologies of modernity and tradition, López transits through the indigenous curriculum as a fractured mirage of the West, a mirage that has projected the image of indigenous life as if it were lived out of time. It is the "backward" characterization of indigenous lifeknowledge, after all, that has served to justify the modern schools' universal applicability to bring literacy (a particular type of literacy, nevertheless) to those who do not have it in "our way." The claims behind such benevolent action have been done under the pretext of preparing people for a future we believe we have more control over than we might actually have. Living for this future has shaped modern life as we know it, which has also required us to bend the past to suit our needs of making an inexistent future virtually manifest in the present. These are the "time-games" we continue to play; the making of *lo indígena* as:

Lumped organs,  
 a Frankensteinian project of assimilation  
 concocted by those who refuse cohabitation  
 In terms other than their own.  
 — Adapt or else remain out of time! —

*Lo indígena*: the neutral article "lo" denounces the othered body as a practice.  
 — Nominalize and thingify at your pleasure or disposal! —  
*Lo indígena*: a corpus composed of histories  
 written in complicity with erasures.

By engaging in historical “time-games” with othered histories and othered times, we inevitably realize: the potential of education to do something harmful to the future can be proportionately inverse to its potential to make something beautiful in communion with others in the present. Though education can mean different things to different people, its functionalist and futuristic qualities introduce undeniable risks to populations in precarious conditions. For some, education through formal schooling delivers numerous benefits. Yet, for others, particularly those who have been “victimized” by the good and bad intentions done in the name of schooling as citizen-making technology, education may signify what indigenous scholar Robert Allen Warrior (1995) describes as a “death dance of dependence.”

Be that as it may, no educational project on a large scale has the potential to liberate people from destitution if material conditions remain ignored *a priori*. If we are to rethink the curriculum outside what we conveniently perform about *lo indígena* through colonialism’s known technologies of destitution and governance (i.e., sorting, labeling, categorizing with necessary rigidity), we would do well to reconsider what our proclaimed solidarity to the Other has done and continues to do in the name of inclusion. For there are tradeoffs to the flying in and out we do in order to visit othered histories. Once we visit these histories, they will haunt us regardless of how ethically we think we are acting.

Certainly, we can pretend that neatly arranging indigenous stories of possessions, dispossessions, and enduring injustices as a curriculum, and carrying these stories around in our griefcases (the heavy luggage containing the sorrows of others that somehow become our own), is the best we can do. Yet if we ask ourselves honestly “whose stories are these we are carrying in our griefcases?”, we might come to an uncomfortable realization. For we actively play a role in “injusticing” the indigenous as a studiable phenomenon. And no matter how we look at the issue, it is difficult to ignore the fact that academics have been part and parcel of the colonial machine’s fuel, thus part and parcel of the problem. To imagine our way in and out of indigenous research, standing on the outside yet looking and feeling as if we were insiders of a world in-process along with ours, remains a difficult task. The depths of the harm that has been done under the rubric of educational progress appear bottomless.

Certainly, no search can be done risk-free, especially research done with/alongside/about marginalized populations. At one point or another, we will be faced with the perils of power asymmetries that will make us question our ethical duties. What is the researchers’ role in caring for the life of others they use in their research, others who find themselves in more precarious conditions than their own? As López maintains, there are always walls to be collapsed, more opportunities to collaborate and “co-create unmaking, generating means of communicating the unavowable” (López, 2017, p. 176). Yet, we would do well to ask, how far are we willing to go to accept the “unknowable” while working under the dictates of academia, a structure whose modern rules and demands fundamentally invest us with the task of partaking in the business of the commodification of marginalized knowledge?

## 3.

To atone for the cardinal sins of our interventions to construct the indigenous otherness vis-à-vis our customary academic technologies requires actions that are politically risky. By refusing to occupy the ventriloquist position, however, we may disqualify our research as viable or, worse, as a fundable enterprise. Likewise, by choosing to write humanistically about the Other in this day and age, especially in the domains of education as social science, we risk venturing into nonrepresentational thinking. Still, there comes a time in the explorations of the continued marginalization of other beings, that methodological fetishisms and representational language, consecrated and legitimized by academic discourses as valid and reliable, no longer suffice to convey what our curiosity mobilizes to make truths stick. Much of human life, however, resists representation.

*Lo*: the pronoun marks the spot of our resistance;  
*Lo* makes the indigenous the problem: *la cuestión indígena*.  
 But whose problem?  
 And who benefits from the problem?

In looking for answers to these thorny ethical questions, I find solace in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's wisdom:

Stop asking and pining,  
 and then, with a better mind  
 you'll discern the true affection  
 of those who come pleading to you.  
 I well reckon that with a lot of weapons  
 your arrogance is well sorted,  
 for in promises and petitions  
 you mix together the Devil,  
 the flesh, and the world.<sup>3</sup> (Ines de la Cruz, 1988)

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's verses speak to and about a patriarchal order. But they also speak to and about the wretched of the Earth. Her message reverberates across time and space; not unlike a viral meme, Sor Juana's words encode themselves in the materiality of futures present, destined to intervene in the future that already is:

*Lo indígena*: still everything and nothing to someone else.  
*Lo indígena*: still practiced as a misnomer.

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<sup>3</sup> Dejad de solicitar, / y después, con más razón, acusáis la afición/ de la que os fuere a rogar. / Bien con muchas armas fundo / que lidia vuestra arrogancia, / pues en promesa e instancia / juntáis diablo, carne y mundo

## 4.

Operating from within the cacophony produced by good and bad intentions advanced on behalf of *lo indígena*'s welfare, López's accounts trace different "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) related to the historicity of *lo indígena* to illustrate the making of a collection of instances of people being turned into problems. Take for instance the introduction of *maestra* Mariela's story, who López portrays in her book as a practitioner cautious about issues of "development." The *maestra*, we are told, recognizes the literacy of the Other as a "legitimate" and economically advantageous tool for greater societal inclusivity. She also does not shy away from discussing the complicated aspects of literacy that, in a way, erases indigenous people's oral histories. With her students, *maestra* Mariela examines instances in which marginalized groups were at the mercy of education rather than served by it. At the same time, Western literacy's "Trojan horse" attribute cannot be disputed as being more valuable than other forms of indigenous literacy to the world "outside."

*Maestra* Mariela's actions illuminate just how indigenous teachers tread on a minefield as they experience up front the nationalizing impetus of indigeneity turned into a curriculum. On the one hand, we could argue that the impossible messiness of institutional education creates curricular opportunities for imagining the world otherwise with others (Macedo & Freire, 1987). Nevertheless, the curriculum as a technology of governance constantly recapitulates colonialism as developmental discourse, nested in late-capitalism's logic, and reflected in mass literacy initiatives destined to promote erasures through large-scale bureaucracies. To what extent can institutional curricula avoid fomenting dispositions to shape subjectivities into particular types of governable citizens, citizens who know their place in society (Popkewitz, 2018)?

In order to trace this tantalizing mess of the making of *lo indígena*, López takes a rhizomatic approach to the study of indigenous education as immanence. Undoubtedly inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) non-closure rationale, López enables her text/self (and consequently her readers) to a boundless version of *lo indígena*, an image always in motion. And through a text that itself appears constructed always in motion, the author engages with important questions:

How has the marginalization of critical analyses within American Indian education contributed to the "culturalization" of American Indian issues and concerns? How has the focus on "cultural" representations of Indianness contributed to a preoccupation with parochial questions of identity and authenticity? And, finally, how has this preoccupation obscured the social-political and economic realities facing indigenous communities, substituting politics of representation for one of radical social transformation? (Grande, 2015, p. 1)

Indeed, López's archeological dig through the ruins of the indigenous curricular scholarship refuses to shield educational history from trauma. For it is difficult to imagine coming to terms with colonialism's roots if not through the examination of trauma. For many indigenous scholars, working through colonization's traumatic aftermath, from within settler colonial states, requires the development of autonomous projects acting in solidarity with indigenous

communities' needs and not with what academics might value as reliable "research." Tuhiwai Smith (2012), for example, defends the achievement of a desired revolutionary *conscientização* through a type of emancipatory indigenous education that refuses Western logocentrism. Tuhiwai implores researchers who have secured positions on the "outside" to open themselves to types of revolutionary thinking that scrutinize "the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies, and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation" (Smith, 2013, p. x). The following account of a poster 10 attached to a classroom wall that López encounters and describes in one of her chapters is a case in point:

The celestial image of a benevolent being from heaven, handing down the "A-B-C," paper, a book, "education," and "teaching" is a gesture of intervention and in making-up people. This image tells the twentiethcentury story of the alphabetizing project, which was first the castilianization of the "Indian," not-yet-to-become Guatemalan. The *analfabeto* hand of an illiterate crowd submerged in absence is promised ascendance to a presence possible, as the image suggests, via the centrality of logos. (López, 2017, p. 75)

What to do with this gift, which is also a form of judgment, is, perhaps, the central ethical question for educational researchers today invested in working with marginalized communities. The very act of researching brings to the surface colonialism's gaze because research on marginalized populations has an insidious history, a heavy suitcase that carries forward the mark of Cain. In the intellectual economies of developed nations research wounds because

Researchers fly in.

Researchers fly out.

And we do so because we can.

Because we wish to atone for the sins

Of Christians past.

But atonement has a price.

Atonement bears hidden costs.

5.

So, where does the "disclosure" of the difficulties in performing *lo indígena* as a curriculum for research that I have outlined throughout this essay leave us? How much does it cost academics, like López, like us, to speak on behalf of indigenous communities under the Heart of the Sky, standing on the outside looking in, looking into the suffering of others?

Considering López's peripatetic project, I take that deconstructing *lo indígena* requires, besides solidarity, a series of steps towards refusal. The first (and perhaps most crucial step) is the refusal of maintaining the gag order that traditional educational research has issued to justify a curriculum muting the productive forces of desire emanating from those most affected

negatively by colonialism's fantasies. Our academic earplugs (often referred to as "disciplinary thinking") might actually be what is preventing us from giving up the ventriloquist position we have occupied for so long. A second step might be ceasing the incessant academic chanting of heroic research enterprises done in the name of political emancipation. This step could help us liberate ourselves from the arrogance implied by thinking that we have the right to know everything. After all, are we to expect gratitude when the heads of those forcibly bowed down to the ground finally raise again to act against us? Is it adoration in their eyes that we seek while we speak on the behalf of marginalized bodies in luxurious convention centers, advancing our careers by studying and speaking about others' pain? Sherman Alexie's verses come to mind, once again, as a series of smoke signals issuing a severe warning about the dangers of curricularizing the literacy of others:

The white man disguised  
as a falcon, swoops in  
and yet again steals a salmon  
from Crow's talons.

Damn, says Crow, if I could swim  
I would have fled this country years ago. (Alexie, 2000)

## 6.

I want to end this essay with a short observation of the risks of multicultural curricula invested in decolonizing education. In the land of *Pau-Brasil* [Brazilwood] where I come from, the 19th of April is celebrated in schools and nationwide as part of a public curriculum: *O dia de Índio*. In English one could *feel* this celebration as "the day of Indians" or "Indigenous Peoples' Day." There's something subtle lost in the translation from the Portuguese, however. There is something lost that is *ours*: the celebration of this body is an invention. Before the 22 of April of 1500, the day Brazil was named Ilha de Vera Cruz, Terra de Santa Cruz, to finally be exploited as a colony for its goods, every day was indigenous peoples' day. Now they only have the 19th of April.

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