On Non-alignable Materialisms

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Embassies are part of the global modern matrix of power—juridical, economic and symbolic—written through the format of the European-modelled nation-state. Their architectures reinforce and speak back to the calculus, and endurance, of Western models of immaterial law and sovereignty, which have always divorced equity from resource bases. Models of the democratic nation took on a more dialectical form in the era of socialism, national and black liberation, and state decolonisation after World War II. However, it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the ongoing challenge that Indigenous and peasant peoples throw to Western legal and aesthetic categories began to figure in the international legal scene of global justice deliberations. This essay moves against Europeanist critiques of imperialism and Left ideals of universally intelligible formalisms—persistently at play within ‘global’ Contemporary Art operations—to point to epistemological issues that precursor the telling of radical, non-alignable contemporary art histories.

Disorganising Détente

The Cold War began with the United States’ introduction of the nuclear bomb into the global matrix. The first atomic bomb was tested in a ‘sacrifice zone’ in New Mexico in 1945, on lands of Apache and Navajo, before those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The U.S. kept data monopolies on the results and immediately sought, and failed to achieve, a ban on atomic weapons through the United Nations. When the U.K. realised the U.S. would not be sharing the science with its ally, it launched its own program in 1945-46. In July 1947, the United States secured 2,000 islands of Micronesia as the ‘Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands’, the only such trusteeship ever granted by the UN.
The ‘Pacific Proving Grounds’ became the site of over a hundred atmospheric and underwater tests of extremely high yield and volume, impacting Islands and their people. The first atomic tests by the Soviet Union came only two years later, in 1949. Meanwhile in the settler colony of Australia, the United Kingdom’s nuclear weapons tests from 1952 to 1963 saw Aboriginal survivors come to terms with the flash-toxification of waterways, totems, food and kin, some before they ever saw their first white man.³ Soviet tests until the 1990s toxified the land and people of Semipalatinsk and Kazakhstan (Southern Test Site) and Novaya Zemlya (Northern Test Site), Uzbekistan, Ukraine and Turkmenistan.

Nuclear gave a new annihilatory morality to the front end of international diplomacy, however access to oil and maritime routes remained the key aims of military and trade strategy. At the beginning of the conflict, the Soviet Union was the second-largest domestic oil producer in the world, behind the U.S. and ahead of Venezuela. Since the 1899 U.S. victory over the Spanish, the U.S. occupation of Cuba and the Philippines, and the British discovery of oil in Persia in 1908, the switch of ship engines from coal to oil, abundant in the U.S., consolidated an Anglo-American ocean. After WW2, while the U.S. continued to extract and further explore for resources in the Middle East and Dutch East Indies, the Soviet Union devoted almost all of its oil production to the expansion of its state economic system within its own borders. With the exception of Syria and Cuba, Soviet military bases were located in the Soviet Republics. By comparison, by 1951, under the moniker of anti-communism, the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 led to the official division of the world into distinct sectors of U.S. military protection — NORTHCOM, SOUTHCOM, CENTCOM, EUCOM, PACOM, and AFRICOM.⁴ The divisions forced a recomposition of the globe through the U.S. takeover of Brit-
ish naval routes, fundamental to global trade command. U.S. Empire positioned nuclear weapons on distant land and waters, in loaded ships, planes and submarines, and involved extensive arsenal-sharing and hosting agreements with alli-ance countries. The destabilisation of democratically elected governments and their economic rearrangement in line with U.S.-American capitalists’ interests is the story of neoliberalism’s install from the 1960s and 70s onwards, well before the fall of the wall. Today, despite recently closing hundreds of bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. maintains nearly 800 military bases in more than 70 countries and territories abroad. By contrast, the combined total of British, French and Russian bases is around 30. Attention to these different scales and anthropogenic materialities of energy unpacks the violence of the so-called ‘détente’ era, and also reframes the dyadic East-West ‘wall’ narrative as itself ‘normalising’ a lopsided story of U.S. imperialism.

Uncounted and Uncountable Labour

The communist horizon of political practice and philosophy was of course first articulated not in the ‘East’ but in the West, as a furthering of the ideals of the French enlightenment. Theorising through the commune, Marx and Engels relegated hunter-gatherer societies into the time of the ‘prior’ — in full accordance with Natural Law precedents, and genocidal Lockean property concepts — to format ‘scientific socialism’ for an extremely historically specific, state-industrial mode of production.

In 1901, before the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, the colonies on the ‘fifth continent’ were federally organised into the first
so-called ‘workers democracy’ of Australia. Following decades of labour exploitation and union activism, and in the context of great insecurity at the top around unregulated migration, frontier wars, and macroeconomic movements of commodities relative to the British colonies, the first Labor party to ever be popularly elected globally established its authority in Australia through a ‘historical compromise’ of capital with labour — through wage-fixing and central arbitration. The new settler state’s approach to national income standards, protective tariffs, and the state delivery of major services immediately produced the highest official living standards and most-equal income distribution for white men out of all ‘developed’ nations. From the outset, legislation made the biopolitics of the social contract clear: Amidst ongoing Aboriginal slavery (which would continue until the 1960s), the Pacific Island Labourers Act of 1901 forcibly and arbitrarily deported South Sea Islanders who had been kidnapped and enslaved in Australia’s sugarcane industry since the 1860s. Following anti-Chinese riots in the goldfields, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 ended all non-European immigration and included a European language dictation test to avoid appearing explicitly racialising. The test was ridiculed in 1934, when it was used to attempt to prevent the entry of the Jewish Czech communist and activist Egon Kisch, exiled from Germany for opposing Nazism.

When the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was spontaneously formed in the 1920s, Aboriginal people already had a hundred years’ experience struggling against what the Party, in its Marxist-Leninist comprehension of the ‘National Question’, and prioritisation of a workerist internationalism above all, would call ‘race chauvinism’ in the developing nation. Since Federation and the restriction and harassment of non-white waterfront workers under the White Australia Policy
(extended as the White Oceans Policy in 1904), Aboriginal people fraternised with African American and West Indian workers through the ‘Coloured Progressive Association’ in Sydney, which modelled itself on Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). At this time, conditions for black seamen had worsened internationally, while the ‘Negro World’ newspaper provided well-informed coverage on the situation of Aboriginal people to its black readership and vice versa. The historian John Maynard has written that the ideas of Frederick Douglass, Booker T Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, alongside Marcus Garvey, would have been familiar to Aboriginal agitators traversing the waterfront of this period. He explains that the UNIA’s ‘call for a return to Africa meant nothing in Australia to the Aboriginal people, but the call for recognising cultural significance and the importance of their own homeland, struck a chord with the Aboriginal leaders.’ Inspired by this scaled up black imaginary, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA), the first united pan-Aboriginal political force, was formed in 1937, in the wake of large-scale revocations of independent Aboriginal reserve lands and brutal child removals policies in New South Wales. The AAPA managed to hold conferences and establish 11 branches despite severe restrictions on Aboriginal people’s movement during this period. These early histories of pan-Aboriginal organising, well prior to the 1960s and 1970s era of Black Power and national land rights, tend to be either silenced or unknown to labour historians privileging narratives of political and imaginative leadership by radical white settlers in industrially-framed actions.

The Comintern, alongside domestic unions, began to address frameworks for Indigenous rights — which it rendered as equivalent to statistical ‘minority rights’ — as early as 1928. However, in settler colonial contexts, it struggled to deal with
the combined imbrication of power through racialised wage inequality during and after legal slavery, and the difference that more-than-human ontologies make to the value theories, formalisms, and non-universal languages for politics.\textsuperscript{17} \textsuperscript{18} The African American communist Harry Haywood wrote of this period how Black delegates’ critiques of the Communist Party of the U.S.A., timing with criticism of an all-white delegation from the Communist Party of South Africa, prompted the Comintern Sub-Commission on Minorities to abandon the view that the interests of ‘Black national minorities’ could be met by a monolithic, mono-cultural socialist revolution. Concurrently, the situation in Europe meant that CPA membership in Australia was boosted by the Party’s prioritisation of a ‘united front against fascism.’ In 1938, when the Aboriginal Progressives Association and Aboriginal Advancement League organised the first national Day of Mourning Rally to protest the 150th Anniversary of the proclamation of British sovereignty (also known as ‘Australia Day’)\textsuperscript{19}, the CPA press criticised Aboriginal activists for excluding whites from the meeting.\textsuperscript{20}

As the Cold War progressed, the state continued to sequester Aboriginal land for atomic testing and the expansion of mining and agricultural industries. The CPA and labour unions began to actively engage with indentured Aboriginal workers, supporting the historic Pilbara Strike of 1946 and the Darwin Aboriginal Workers’ Strike of 1950-51. During this period, paranoia around the scale of Communist Party activity and conversions to its ranks was exploited by the state to spy on — and propagandise the illegitimacy of — Aboriginal organisations. In 1949, the year the GDR was established, major strikes in the open cut coal mines in New South Wales saw a Labor government use military troops for the first time in peace-time to break a trade union strike of 23,000 workers.
By some accounts, the CPA had applied Cominform policy to activate a critique of Labor Party reformism within the workers’ movements. This led to a major split in the Labor Party in 1955 over the issue of communism. An attempt was made by the Labor Party leader to outlaw the CPA entirely, through a national election. The pushback against this motion ensured Labor would not re-enter Federal leadership until Gough Whitlam was elected in 1972.

Bob Boughton has written at length about the Communist Party of Australia’s involvement in major Aboriginal-led workers’ industrial strikes and walk-off actions, concurrent to its advocacy of national citizenship rights, Aboriginal courts, and more. Despite its small size and main influence on, and penetration of, trade unions, the CPA was the only political party advocating against genocidal assimilationist policies in Australia throughout much of the twentieth century. Still, it retained its dependency on Soviet instruction and theoretical modelling that reiterated divisions between dispossessed urban Aboriginal people — framed as more ‘advanced’ in the process of proletarianisation — and remote Aboriginal people still living traditionally on country, assumed to be more ‘culturally’ worthy of land. In this way, the CPA reproduced the taxonomies and developmentalist logics violently assumed by colonialism and state anthropology, and ‘improved’ upon by assimilationist missionaries. Only in the 1950s did the CPA take the position that all Aboriginal people had collective rights to land and self-determination. The key turn of anti-colonial materialist imagination away from modernist legal-forms would come with the seven year strike of the Gurindji stock workers, begun in 1966, when they strategically and epistemologically moved the index of their fight — from an industrial campaign for wages, to the physical site and occupation of their homelands — forcing the frame of struggle towards land rights, which they won.
Incommensurable Materialisms

Only where art history and theorising assumes a materialism that is non-aligned with the West’s jurisgeneration of the globe can it meet up with transformative justice and aesthetic projects that refuse what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the ‘fractuous forms of modern thought’. Since the colonial period, nation states denied full citizenship to Indigenous and hunter-gathering peoples. This exclusion was based partly on the idea that Indigenous people had not extracted themselves from their environment sufficiently enough to realise a performed degree of self-alienation ‘proper’ to the surplus consciousness required for ownership. The communist call for property-abolition through the Parisian commune contributes limited comparative civilisational literacy for justice here, because of what is always-already excluded by property formalism, alongside of the racism of the merely biopolitical, an-ecological contract of the nation-state idea.

But imperialism, and resistance to such, has always been a process that extends beyond the confines of available subjectivities and taxonomies on the one hand, and figurations of alterity on the other. Irene Watson’s writing on the fundamentals of law from the Aboriginal side of the jurisprudential frontier asserts that Aboriginal law exists in all matter and has a wide relationality. Materialist realism around this relation to land includes the never-counted labour and maintenance work involved in keeping country healthy, through practices that don’t look much like Western work, and assumes patterns of connection that can wear thin, be torn, neglected, and increasingly, turn literally toxic. Counter to this fullness of Indigenous materialities, Robert Cover writes comparatively of the jurispathic tendencies of legal agents of the Western state to kill, via interpretation, the diverse legal traditions...
that compete with it. Fixations on borders, immaterially modelled sovereignty and unfettered assumptions of resources render the state a key agent of violence.\textsuperscript{26} For Cover, Western jurisprudence is not only homicidal but suicidal in this sense, precisely in its destroying of chthonic (earth-dwelling) law and alternative worlds of legal meaning and material correspondences. ‘Law is a bridge to alterity’, Cover writes, and yet law destroys alternate worlds of legal meaning. Bronwyn Lay, elaborating on Cover, notes that Western law ‘does so out of fear that the nomos or normative universe we inhabit must be maintained. The possibility of building an alternative world of meaning and value entails the risk of loss and potential chaos.’\textsuperscript{27}

Globally, it was not the events of 1989, but the 1960s and 1970s when the total picture of the relation of art and politics under modernism, assumed by liberal ontologies, and radicalised by communism, started to crack and expose the normative institutional line ‘managed’ by colonially modelled European and settler institutions, and move this towards more worldly, less hierarchical aesthetic paradigms. In many respects, Gough Whitlam\textsuperscript{28} and other ousted figures from the install phase of the U.S.-dominated globe were guided by what avant garde artists at best work to know: that autonomy must be wagered at and performed, if it is possible for it to exist in relation, at all.\textsuperscript{29} One of the key legacies of the Cold War and its metaphors lies in how it operates as a site for political nostalgia around the coherency of enemies and enmities, in a current climate of pervasive border multiplication, job loss, and in/security. For da Silva, the neoliberal capitalist management of nation-states forces the ‘juridico-economic reform’ of the global contract into the expansion and consolidation of the market, the restriction of labour, and the cutting of social and redistributive rights. Democracy unrealised is further dema-
terialised here, transformed into increasingly class-managed forms of ‘diversity’, an atmospheric mirage, in which already epistemologically incommensurable cultural and political rights are set even further apart from the question of capital governance, and the extraction and distribution of resources.30

Non-aligned Art under Planetary Contemporaneity

If ‘Contemporary Art’ often plays into a teleology that pits globalised liberal freedoms of expression against the revolutionary-cum-authoritarian state regimes of the former East, then non-aligned art histories continue to challenge these flattened achievements and platitudes, alongside the epistemological failures of state socialisms.31 Jelena Vesić understands the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski to have gone some way towards transcending the ‘vampiristic preservation of Cold War configurations’ within one-dimensional teleologies of Contemporary Art’s post-89 status.32 Working laterally and at different scales of vertical reading, Piotrowski refused to rope the ‘East’ through a generic Marxist-Leninist lens, emphasising differences between locales and specific ideological state apparatuses that implemented varied state cultural politics and policies, enabling the greater differentiation of art-historical interpretations around apparently similar movements in parallel moments of production. For Vesić, such an approach to art historical materialism productively objectifies “an internal Other” of specific nation-states within the space of Eastern Europe... not in the sense of ethnicity, but in the sense of apparatuses”. This makes possible art histories that engage infrastructural specifics of power, and can acknowledge internal cosmopolitanism and the internation-
al imagination of local movements inside the ‘Former East’, while straddling a situated present, and the predominantly West-interpolated canon of global art histories.\textsuperscript{33}

Still, Piotrowski’s program for a horizontal and comparative methodology that might ‘unite’ the dynamic peripheries of the world’s art to finally overwhelm and deconstruct West-centred, universalised art history, elides the acknowledgment (as most celebratory ‘postcolonial’ art histories do) of the persistence of a violence of form in globalised liberal law, which continues to underwrite that same ‘realised’ globality. At stake is not only a proper ‘translation’ of a more laterally accessible contemporaneity, but ongoing dealings with the persistence of annihilatory programs of land and labour extraction and exploitation, which are neutralised by the neoliberal logic of market efficiency wherever the ‘post-colonial’ is assumed to mark (in and as relief) the post-1989 moment. Certainly, there is cause to celebrate the achievement of new cognitions by Northern art historians entering a new exhibition-historical phase of grappling with Indigeneity, from \textit{Magiciens de la Terre} (1989) onwards. However, one cannot theoretically or materially, neither with Bourriaud nor with Belting,\textsuperscript{34} locate any worldly postcoloniality of artistic expression that merely complements or parallels Northern/Western avant-gardes at the point where the normative legal programs of the modern and contemporary era show up their extinction-oriented paradigms.\textsuperscript{35} For Vesić, still thinking in the spirit of global justice and (post-)socialist, non-aligned legacies, ‘one must seek out, find, and relate to new spheres of emerging authority, power, and values . . . [where] perhaps the biggest challenge, and the greatest need, is to actually assume a position from which you can critique both the modernist-Western canon and the contemporary-globalist canon.\textsuperscript{36} The move here is, furthermore, between critique and
something more, when approaching cultural politics beyond the frame of proletarianisation, on the side of land-based socialities that have been violently and disciplinarilly refused historical time. It is under the logic of this ghosting too, that ressentiments arrive, alongside a ‘race for theory’ surrounding the perceived inundation of Contemporary Art history with practices unfamiliar to the political and aesthetic heritages of the Euro-American paradigm.

As is clear from the composition of current struggles against old and new toxicities, the peasant ongoingly, and the Indigenous in particular — who have incommensurable work to do outside of wages and transparent insurrections — never did fit in to either liberal or historical materialist representations of the proper universal political subject, and its aesthetic paradigm. This is because neither democratic ideals nor the remnant Christian teleologies of the Communist horizon ever historically or epistemologically accounted for the fundamental damage and material violence of land dispossession. Nor did modernist models produce analytics for cultural production and maintenance practices that innovate despite imperialism outside biopolitical frameworks.

Then as now, the white/settler art historian, post-autonomist, or workerist, at best, grasps without grabbing a multi-economism and deep languaging that precedes and exceeds the bounds of all ‘proper’ available, which is to say, often violent and mediocre, aesthetic training under (now late) liberal globalism. Literacy in these histories and entanglements of solidarity, furthermore, does not create any pre-fab tools for art or justice. It only marks out a kind of improvisatory repeating genre that might navigate the asymmetries in order to redirect capital and value towards forms of an otherwise. Consensual European and settler embodiments here are of a limited,
utilitarian inexpertise, because inherently non-privy to the fullness of the custodial drama of responsibility to heed this non-general intellect for land, language, and kinship. Institutions, meanwhile, still move towards extinction, where they continue to assume as normal and formal the annihilatory forms of thought that maintain frontier paradigms.

The author would like to thank Megan Cope and Bernard Lüthi for their dialogue on final drafts of this article.
The title is a reference to the Non-Aligned Movement of nations that during the Cold War aimed for national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security in their struggle against imperialism, colonialism, foreign aggression, interference beyond Cold War bipolarity and bloc politics. My writing on politics of form, in proximity to that archive, extends from conversations and collaboration with Jelena Vesić and Vladimir Jerić Vlidi, including our essay, On Neutrality. The letter from Melos (Belgrade: Non-Aligned Modernity edition, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017).


Ibid.

The Ex-Embassy exhibition is using here the GDR’s territorial description of the land mass of Australia.


Johan Maynard notes Tom Lacey, Fred Maynard, Sid Ridgeway among Aboriginal men who evidently mixed with the CPA. See his text “In the interests of our people: the influence of Garveyism on the rise of Australian Aboriginal political activism,” *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 29 (2005), 1-22.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Generally, the trades and labour councils, waterfront and mining workers unions.

Of relevance here is the first ACP document laid out in 1931, the "Communist Party's Fight for Aborigines: Draft Programme of Struggle Against Slavery," which included a call for the abolition of all forms of ‘forced labour; equal wages; abolition of the Aboriginal Protection Boards ... capitalism's slave recruiting agencies and terror organisations; the release of Aboriginal prisoners; the institution of Aboriginal juries for cases involving Aboriginal people; the restoration of Central, Northern and N-W Australia to form independent Aboriginal republics; and the development of Aboriginal culture.'

As Boughton notes, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) would later reproduce the entire policy in a secret 1962 briefing paper, ‘Communist Party of Australia Policy and Penetration in Australian Aboriginal Activities and Organisations’, which drew ‘particular attention to the demand which called for: The handing over to the aborigines of large tracts of watered and fertile country, with towns, seaports, railways, roads, etc., to become one or more independent aboriginal states or republics. The handing back to the aborigines of all Central, Northern and North West Australia to enable the aborigines to develop their native pursuits. These aboriginal republics to be independent of Australia or other foreign powers. To have the right to make treaties with foreign powers, including Australia, establish their own army, governments, industries, and in every way be independent of imperialism.'

19 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia_Day#Controversies_and_issues and https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-day-invasion-day

20 Boughton, "The Communist Party of Australia’s Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Rights, 1920-1970."

21 Ibid.


24 Povinelli, The Cunning of Recognition.


26 Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," Issues in Legal Scholarship, 6, Iss. 1 (Jan 2006).


See my collaborative take with Danny Butt on the colonial legacies of artistic autonomy in the neoliberal era of global art here: https://joaap.org/issue10/oriellybutt.htm


Ibid.

Bourriaud and Beltings’ very different propositions for (alter)modernity and non-hierarchical global art are addressed in *Extending the Dialogue: Essays by Igor Zabel*

Vesić, "The Annual Summit of Non-Aligned Art Historians."

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