Reframing autonomy in political geography: a feminist geopolitics of autonomous resistance

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At first glance the communities populated by indigenous subsistence farmers in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico appear cohesive and homogenous. Corn and coffee plots dot the landscape interrupted only by scattered dwellings and coffee drying patios. However, upon closer examination different agricultural practices, territorial claims, and political affiliations become apparent. Some differences are more visible; for example, party affiliation or support may be painted on the sides of homes, or farmers might wear shirts with election slogans printed on them. Other differences are less visible; some farmers eschew official parties and politics as part of their support for social movements that oppose them. The expression of the less-visible differences that pervades this landscape is connected to the declaration and practice of autonomy by farmers in resistance. A resistencia autónoma (autonomous resistance) is asserted by farmers who have declared autonomy and who refuse to recognize the Mexican state—it is a politics of deliberate disengagement. This expression of autonomy is bound up in larger scale political-territorial discourses; simultaneously it is personal and embodied by a range of political actors.

The struggle for autonomy for campesinos/as (peasants, as they self-identify) is not simply a rejection of state governance and neoliberal market structures, it is a process of creating self-reliant and secure livelihoods. As one farmer related to me:

Autonomy is not just a political thing anymore. It is an economic thing and a social thing... It is not about territory with borders, it is about action, about growing coffee, and about having the land for the milpa [cornfield]. It is about daily life and how we live, what we do every day. It is about not being told what to do from the outside.

Autonomy is all at once intimate, individual, and communal. For farmers, autonomy is about daily life and agricultural production. In this paper, I argue that academic understandings of
autonomy tend to be universal, singular, and absolute and that they should be multiplied and re-read for difference. In self-declared autonomous communities in the highlands autonomy is a process and embodied practice. It is a dynamic practice of resisting state-led politics and economic development while maintaining livelihoods through agricultural production, specifically the production of native corn. The material and embodied production and consumption of corn serves as an object of analysis here. In examining the practices that farmers view as contributing to autonomy, different understandings and ways of knowing autonomy emerge, which stand outside a universal framing.

In the aftermath of the bloody but short uprising by the Zapatistas in 1994, thirty-four official municipalities were declared autonomous and in resistance in Chiapas State (Stephen 2002:76). Less visible indigenous groups in Chiapas, including Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, provided support for the declaration of autonomy made by the Zapatistas (Tavanti 2003). Even as these groups declared autonomy they still sought rights and recognition as citizens of Mexico (Stephen 2002; Stahler-Sholk 2001). While initial negotiations were based on recognition from the state, the failure of the state to implement indigenous rights accords led to a unilateral declaration of autonomy (Speed and Reyes 2002). Although this declaration of autonomy is grounded in place, it does not map on to official or contiguous territory. Moreover, resistencia autónoma is a rejection of government assistance, institutions, and power-sharing while also being based in the creation of viable alternatives (e.g. the civilian governments of the Zapatistas). Because the social movement action in Chiapas is often associated with self-determination and alter-globalization, studies focused there invariably tie resistance to opposition against hegemonic global forces. While this categorization may assist with understanding wide-scale politics regarding identity and neoliberal capitalism, as well as state and corporate
practices, it tells us very little about what the politics of resistance look like as part of everyday life in Chiapas.

Participants in this research are supporters of autonomy and are cooperative members in Zapatista or Sociedad Civil Las Abejas coffee cooperatives. It should be noted that this is not a paper about these social movements. While participation in these movements is part of resistencia autónoma, the analysis here is focused on farmer practices. The politics and struggle of these movements is “sedimented” in place (Nelson 2003:564), and provides a political discourse that is imbricated in the fabric of everyday life in self-declared autonomous communities. Indeed, how autonomy is deployed makes up part of a larger daily struggle by these actors, who may be linked to a range of movements (e.g. Zapatista, fair trade), and whom I collectively refer to as farmers, or campesinos/as, in resistance. I spent time in several highland communities visiting the coffee cooperatives, the homes and fields of farmers, and also visiting with farmers, asking questions about the production of coffee, corn, and resistance. These conversations led me to begin questioning how to think about autonomy. Notably, it became clear to me that how campesinos/as experience autonomy—as the living, breathing, embodiment of indigenous resistance in the highlands—multiplies our understandings of autonomy.

The need to rethink autonomy is apparent when observing the processes and embodied practices of resistencia autónoma in self-declared autonomous communities in the highlands, where people are not making demands on the state for power-sharing and the spaces of autonomy are not demarcated by official borders. There are many places, globally, where there are active demands for autonomy that are being levied at state governments and as non-capitalist measures. Yet the demand for autonomy in Chiapas stands out as an example where people are effectively bypassing state processes.
Even as state processes permeate the highlands, participants in self-declared autonomous communities remain disengaged. The state looks to the official municipality of Chenalhó (see Figure 1)—which does not map onto self-declared autonomous communities—and charts its campaign against autonomous resistance through attempting to control bodies and territory. Regular military patrols secure the roadways. Sponsorship of paramilitary activity creates a landscape of fear. Political campaigning highlights the presence of the parties quite literally on homes and bodies through painted slogans, posters, and t-shirts. The most direct efforts of the state however, lie in economic investment, through welfare and development programs, as well as communal land privatization through which the state attempts to fracture community relations and target bodies. Resistencia autónoma does not fall cleanly into universal understandings of autonomy, which tend to render the struggle of farmers in resistance invisible.

To rethink autonomy, I attempt to move beyond a more simplified expansion of existing ideas of power-sharing with the state, territory as a container, and/or organized resistance, and instead strive to uncover processes, practices, and knowledges otherwise. In this paper I scale-down from the state, territory, and organized action and instead examine the construction of autonomy as a process and practice, with a particular emphasis on how the practice of autonomy intersects with subsistence food and fair trade coffee production in indigenous communities. My examination of autonomy in highland Chiapas is situated in broader discussions of the geographies of autonomy and an intervention via feminist geopolitics and decolonial philosophy. The specific contribution is considering multiple knowledges of autonomy and recognizing it also as an embodied and material practice. I demonstrate that there are multiple ways of knowing and understanding autonomy that have been rendered invisible and provide a reframing, which
breaks away from the normalizing tendencies of geopolitics. My aim is to show the pluriversality of autonomy through pushing against the geopolitics of knowledge.

In order to understand autonomy as a material, embodied practice, we must first consider academic renderings of autonomy. This paper begins with a discussion of contemporary conversations on autonomy and territory. In addressing the need to reframe autonomy, I then consider the geopolitics of knowledge and draw from decolonial literatures and feminist geopolitics to multiply our understandings of autonomy. To elucidate diverse knowledges of autonomy this is followed by an engagement with the case material that focuses on the lived experience of autonomy for farmers in resistance. Examining the experience of autonomy through non-interaction with state processes and via agricultural production assists with reframing autonomy.

{Figure 1}

Geographies of Autonomy

Autonomy as a site of study remains undertheorized and narrowly defined. To define autonomy, scholars turn to its Greek roots: auto-self and nomos-law (cf. Böhm et al. 2010:19; Chatterton 2005; 2010; Ulmen 1993). Autonomy is thus framed as self-governance and power-sharing with the state. In the geographical imagination, it constitutes territorial control and governance over a bounded space demarcated by borders. If defined at all, many studies that focus on autonomy rely on political/legal understandings of self-governance based in western thought. For example, publications focused on social movements and/or politics tend to use the definition of self-governance as a foundation to discuss self-determination and relations with the state (cf. Böhm et al. 2010; Chatterton 2005; 2010; Derrick 2008; Nash 2010; Ulmen 1993). In much Anglophone work, autonomy is undertheorized and is a singularly defined referent for
relations with the state (work by Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) and Pickerill and Chatterton (2006), who theorize autonomy as contextual and situated, as well as Dinerstein (2014) who articulates autonomy as organizing hope, stand out as exceptions). Latin American scholars have added important discussions of plurinationalism to this conceptualization of autonomy (see: Almeida et al. 2005; Bárcenas 2005; Cruz 2003; Sánchez 1999; Tituaña 2000) that have readily been taken up on writings about self-determination and indigenous social movements. Geographers writing about autonomy tend to rely on this universal understanding and have used it to discuss local autonomy and the production of place (DeFilippis 1999), ethno-territorial claims to territory (Perrault and Green 2013), anti-capitalist processes and spaces of social change (Chatterton 2005; 2008; 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill 2009; Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006), and praxis (Lopes de Souza 2015).

Attempts to re-theorize autonomy draw on oppositional action and everyday activism broadening the geographical imaginary and spatiality of autonomy to include anti-capitalist and anarchist practice (see: Chatterton 2005; 2010; Dinerstein 2015; Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Marks 2012; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). The reconfiguration of autonomy as a struggle for power apropos the state and capitalism offers a new way to think about how people agitate for and deploy political autonomy (see: Chatterton 2010). However, linking autonomy to political resistance does not escape characterizing it in geopolitically normalized ways that privilege the state, territory, and capitalism. In non-Anglophone, academic writing on autonomy, similar ideas prevail, many are concerned with social movement action and forming new relations with the state and therefore focus on self-determination (Diaz-Polanco 1991; Almeida et al. 2005), indigenous identity (Bárcenas 2005; Cruz 2003; Sánchez 1999), and anti-state/anti-capital movements (Baronnet et al. 2011; Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007).
The threads embroidered through scholarly examinations of autonomy detail it in two main ways: first, as top-down, devolution of power from the state to a minority group and, second, as a bottom-up, form of political resistance driven by social movement action against the state and/or neoliberal capitalist systems. In this first thread, the state (in its multiple forms) and power-sharing are key features; in the second, self-determination and social movements shape demands for autonomy. Both draw on the concept of territory.

Unlike autonomy, which is undertheorized in geography (and beyond)—not even warranting explanation in the *Dictionary of Human Geography* (2009)—territory is reasonably well-trod ground, having formed part of lengthy debates in geography and beyond. Geographers begin with the idea of territory as a unit of space that is bounded and controlled—generally by a state (Elden 2009:xxv). Such a definition opens up questions of statehood and sovereignty. Interventions by Agnew (1994) on cultivating a historical-geographical theory of territory led to fruitful discussions amongst political geographers in the U.S. and Western Europe (cf. Elden 2010a; Murphy 2013; Paasi 1998; 2009; Taylor 1995) and later inspired a 2010 symposium in *Geopolitics*, which revisited the “territorial trap” and offered a critique of normative geopolitical thinking. In that symposium, issues of historical context (Elden 2010b), identity politics (Murphy 2010), non-state actors (McConnell 2010), and state sovereignty (Newman 2010) were addressed and scholars were urged to take new approaches to territory. Seeing territory ‘unproblematically’ defined as bounded space, Elden articulated territory as a historical-geographical question that must be examined in different ways (2010a:812).

Territory as a concept should not be neglected when reframing autonomy. Territory also has at its roots a Euro-centric perspective (Elden 2010b; 2013), which forecloses other ways that knowledge about territory is produced. Autonomous resistance is tied to territory—growing corn
and coffee requires agricultural land—but this is not the territory of the nation-state or even the community. It is scaled down to a patchwork quilt of spaces that autonomy is tied to through household labor and food production. A reframing of autonomy as more open (cf. Dinerstein 2015), relational (cf. Pickerill and Chatterton 2006), and multiple, additionally points to territory as a “multi-faceted concept” (Newman 2010:773), which can be read and re-read differently in different times and spaces.

Reframing requires re-imagining these universals—re-reading the practices, discourses and embodiments of autonomy and territory for difference. What this means in practice is acknowledging a spectrum of autonomies: the disembodied, state- and western-centric, as well as the everyday, lived, and embodied geographies of autonomy. Geographers’ concern with the difference within and between places and the networks and intertwining characteristics of processes in and across space make it an ideal place for rethinking autonomy. If, as geographers we are concerned with ‘why things are the way they are because of where they are,’ we should be more attentive to epistemologies (plural) and step away from drawing western-centric readings of autonomy and territory in broad brushstrokes across space.⁴

**Reframing Autonomy**

Understanding autonomy across a spectrum assists with breaking down universal political geographic imaginaries of autonomy. However, to re-read autonomy for difference we must reject a solely disembodied and state- (or market-) centric framing and decolonize the universal understanding of what autonomy is. A reframing necessitates multiple and varied lenses. To do this I read autonomy through the everyday and through personal experiences. A feminist geopolitical approach assists with this project.
Feminist geopolitics—with its own distinct epistemological lineage—is arguably a new reading of geopolitics. In rethinking geopolitics a whole host of scholarship is mobilized. These new readings—critical, subaltern, alter-, anti-, feminist—offer additional ways to insert agency, to ‘people’ geopolitics (see: Koopman 2011:276), to provide a platform for marginalized voices and practices, as well as think about how political power and knowledge are generated. A feminist geopolitics facilitates analyses of the political in public and private arenas—completely breaking apart this binary in many cases—and also the visible and hidden workings of power in everyday life (Dowler and Sharp 2001:167). Hyndman (2010) argues that feminist geopolitics elucidates the more material aspects of how geopolitical processes shape and are shaped by the everyday lived experiences of individuals and communities (see also: Dixon and Marston 2011; Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001; 2004; Massaro and Williams 2013; Nicley 2009; Squire 2015). This elucidation incorporates and extends beyond attention to issues of gender to assist with examining how power is deployed, by whom, how, and at what scales (Koopman 2011:276; see also: Hyndman 2004). It also serves to ground, locate and embody geopolitical practices and processes (Dixon 2015; Dowler and Sharp 2001; Pain 2009). Most importantly, a feminist geopolitics offers a way forward and assists with making visible those places, practices, and peoples that/whom are creating a number of different forward-looking paths. My paper sits firmly alongside a feminist geopolitical framework, which destabilizes a god’s eye view of the world (Dixon 2015), shifts the scale of analysis away from the state (cf. Hyndman 2010), and seeks to not only deconstruct, but to construct anew (Gilmartin and Kofman 2004; Koopman 2011; Sharp 2013).

If much geopolitical inquiry looks at subjects of the state and state power, the question arises as to how might we view those who attempt to ignore and work outside state power? A
feminist geopolitics assists with decentering the state as the object of analysis, yet examinations often pivot around the impact of state power and knowledge. Feminist geopolitical analyses step away from the political of the public and draw closer to the political of the intimate and personal, examining how state action and political power impacts everyday lives. Case studies framed by feminist geopolitical analysis often situate bodies in relation to the state; for example, Hyndman brings feminist geopolitics to war (2007; 2010) and refugee mobility (2011); Pain (2009) to terror and security; Casolo and Doshi (2013) address neoliberal development; Christian et al. (2015) assess nationalism; and Williams and Massaro (2013) look at (in)security.

While it cannot be denied that state process and practices are present in the highlands, what I point out here is that understandings of autonomy do not come from the state, but from the self, agricultural practice, and discourses of resistance that have been sedimented in place. Again, this gets back to Dixon’s (2015) argument that feminist geopolitics is a way of thinking through difference. Scaling down to the impact of larger processes on the intimate and the everyday experience of bodies is an important contribution. Feminist approaches consider how bodies experience power differently (see: Hyndman 2004; Dowler and Sharp 2001), but in geopolitics, this too is grounded in place. Just as bodies matter, so too do spaces (cf. Nelson 1999) and in this paper I start, not with state processes, but the spatially-embedded practice of self-declared autonomy in place. In this place, the state is contingent, and the production (and consumption) of corn and coffee is the production of geopolitical imaginaries that stand outside the state.

Although feminist geopolitics is attentive to deconstructing normalized discourses as a part of the project of constructing alternatives, this project is, for the most part located in western concerns; marginalized knowledges are needed to disrupt western-facing perspectives that are
largely based in universals. Within feminist geopolitics there remain conceptual limits. Even as we continually work against unbalanced power/knowledge dynamics our investigations must continue to be inward looking as well. My purpose in framing the paper this way is twofold, both to build on the project of feminist geopolitics as a mechanism for investigating difference and also to draw attention to the decolonial as potential lens for doing so. In this way we can pull in knowledge that is often overlooked in geopolitics. It is important to stand alongside the concerns of feminist geopolitics while also interrogating how colonial/imperial power promotes particular ways of thinking and producing knowledge. A feminist geopolitics is something we can “do” (Dixon 2015) as part of this project, but here I broaden the conversation to consider the geopolitics of knowledge and share the decolonial as a possible avenue for extending the project of critical geopolitics.

The geopolitics of knowledge is also an examination of less-visible spaces of change. Coming out of decolonial theory, the geopolitics of knowledge is effectively a theory of power over knowledge production. Decolonial theorists argue that knowledge production is an inherently colonial process. The framing used by this group of scholars, called the coloniality of power, is used to make evident globalized hierarchal systems of knowledge, which are based in the colonial experience (see: Dussel 2003; Grosfoguel 2002; 2007; 2008; Mignolo 2000; 2005; 2011; Quijano 1997; 2007; 2008; Vallega 2014). Theorists argue that the denial of a diversity of knowledges is critical to imperialism. While the postcolonial is concerned with the legacies of (‘after’) colonialism, the decolonial is focused on the coloniality of power and knowledge, which emerged during the colonial period and continued following independence (Vallega 2014; Walsh 2007).
A decolonial approach is one that makes visible knowledges from below. It is a space of pluriversal thinking which recognizes difference, while rejecting universalizing, colonizing, and normalizing ways of knowing and understanding the world. Note that this is not specified as the negation of western ways of knowing but one that recognizes multiple knowledges (Grosfoguel 2011). The pluriversal is a rejection of the singular and describes those ways of thinking and dialogues that are continuously produced and co-produced from sites of difference. Decolonial scholarship attempts to recognize and incorporate the production of knowledge by those who have been long-marginalized on the basis of race/class/gender/sexuality (Walsh 2007). The result is recognition of knowledges and practices in/from many places.

Putting these two strands of thought in conversation assists with not only questioning western-ways of knowing (as Sharp 2011; 2013, suggests we should), Euro-centric discourses, and universalizing concepts, it also allows for examining the intimate and material; for thinking through difference, and considering the possibilities of ‘worlds and knowledges otherwise’ (see: Escobar 2008:17). In this way we can theorize from the spaces where this knowledge sits and examine what is often rendered invisible (cf. Elwood et al. 2016). As Lugones notes, it is in the overlapping of lived experiences and in “the production of the everyday” where we can identify knowledge and practice, not dichotomously, but as breaking out of the binaries that are produced and reproduced by the dehumanizing nature of a singular knowledge of being (2010:754). I draw attention to this reframing both to shape the empirical section of the paper, which offers a portrait of autonomy as a situated, lived, everyday experience, and also to provide an intervention in theorizing autonomy. It is not enough to re-theorize from within; as scholars we must investigate difference.
The primary way that I approach reframing autonomy is through a representation of difference detailed in Table 1. I acknowledge this characterization not as the way to frame autonomy, but as a method to move away from normalized and universal understandings of autonomy and instead multiply and diversify it. The table is divided into four sections that are not necessarily distinct, and in some cases overlap—oppositional action and identity politics are certainly not mutually exclusive—and display a spectrum of the political geographies of autonomy. Additionally, the table is describing power relations (see: DeFilippis 2004; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006), actually existing autonomies, and also, those autonomies that are still being sought. Revisioning autonomy in this way assists with recognizing not just one version of autonomy but many.
Autonomy is many times described as territorial control and power-sharing with the state. This depiction points to a legal understanding of autonomy that frames it as self-government and the devolution of power to a minority group over a contiguous territory (see: Åkermark 2013; Cornell 2002; Derrick 2008; Heintze 1998). Cornell notes that territorial autonomy is often granted, or devolution is acknowledged, by a central government to a minority group; the resulting autonomous government, “may share most attributes of a state” (2002:252). In some cases the power-sharing is articulated as relational, rather than hierarchical (see: Brown 1992; DeFilippis 1999; Lake 1994). However, this vision of autonomy is firmly grounded in territory (as a bounded space).
In a number of cases autonomy over territory is additionally tied to movements for *self-determination*. Böhm et al. note:

Recently we have witnessed the increasing importance of autonomy in many social movements across the world. This usually involves a struggle for self-determination, organizational self-management and independent social and economic practices vis-à-vis the state and capital (2010:17).

Demands for recognition and self-determination form a core component of collective action and struggles for autonomy by minority groups—especially indigenous groups (see: Bárcenas 2005; Cruz 2003; Sánchez 1999; Stahler-Sholk 2004). Here I am not referring to self-determination as the principle guiding state formation, but as the rights of peoples/groups to determine their economic, political, and cultural practices. Autonomy in this case is broadly understood as attaining rights to ethno-cultural practices and internal decision-making power, which is historically tied to territory (see: Åkermark 2013; Bárcenas 2005; Murphy 2013).

*Individual autonomy*, can be read in different ways and is not restricted to single actors, but may also be movements of individual actors with varied (and multiple) identities. In considering embodied geographies of autonomy scholars include individual *and* social movement everyday practices. Drawing on feminist perspectives of freedom, autonomy is intimate (see: Daya 2009, on the construction of the new Indian woman), relational (see: Westlund 2009), tied to personal decision-making, identities, and sometimes expressed through activism. Many scholars point to anti-capitalist practice and struggles for independence from the state and neoliberal market as important components of autonomy (see: Blaser et al. 2010; Böhm et al. 2010; Chatterton 2005; 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010; Featherstone 2003; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). These personal politics may be put into practice in varied ways (e.g. protest, mundane acts) and at multiple scales.
Finally, when considering embodied autonomies, I am trying to open up the geographies of autonomy through considering not just the individual, but *communities* of people. In some cases, such communities may be tied to social movements or other organizations, or class-struggle (see work by autonomist and Open Marxists: Hart and Negri, Holloway, Dinerstein), which may or may not be the basis of struggles for autonomy. By considering autonomy from this perspective, day-to-day practices by people are made visible. Nevertheless, current understandings of autonomy tend to neglect the sedimented discourses or mundane practices that are undertaken in attempts to move towards autonomy. In making material and embodied practices visible, autonomy takes on additional meanings.

What I attempted to do in Table 1—which, is not intended to be comprehensive—is show a more diverse spectrum of autonomy that moves beyond geographies of autonomy that are readily written into the landscape of ethno-territorial conflict, demands for self-determination and bodily autonomies, as well as anti-capitalist practices. For within these framings very little is discussed about the daily practices of autonomy. In reframing, we can begin to see a more nuanced spectrum of autonomy that extends beyond a relation to the state, territory, and neoliberal economy to processes, as well as, material and embodied practices.

**Autonomous Resistance in Highland Chiapas**

Autonomy as a lived experience in the highlands of Chiapas takes on new meanings and understandings in the context of the production and consumption of corn and coffee. Furthermore, when delinked from the politics of petitioning the state for rights to territory—as is the case in self-declared autonomous communities—more nuanced understandings of autonomy and how it is put into practice emerge. Scaling down from the demands of groups upon the state
to the mundane everyday practices of farmers assists with viewing important processes linked to autonomy that we might otherwise overlook. Creating a commitment to examining day-to-day practices and to analyzing the process of building autonomy within communities, even as farmers are linked to larger-scale networks is critical to making visible multiple meanings of autonomy.

Background and Methodology

Fieldwork took place between 2010-2013 in the highlands, where I conducted interviews and observation in self-declared autonomous communities populated by indigenous Tzotzil- and Spanish-speaking Mayan campesinos/as producing milpa (intercropped corn, beans, and squash) for subsistence and coffee for the fair trade marketplace. In this study I worked with participants to learn how we might consider the lived experience of autonomy. I established a measure of accountability to both participants and to their ways of knowing and understanding the ideas under discussion (see: Alcoff 1992; Newdick 2012) through a dialogic cycle of sharing the research and reformulating my interview questions in conversation with participants. Having a dialogue about the politics of resistance—which are sedimented in self-declared autonomous communities through social movement discourses—and how farmers were considering their roles and everyday practices as part of their struggle was a fundamental component shaping the direction of this work. Discussion about what autonomy meant, what it looked like and how farmers were enacting autonomy in their communities shed light on different ways of thinking about autonomy distinct from definitions of self-governance and power-sharing.

Working through this collective, dialogic cycle of asking questions created a space for collaborative thinking. Many of my conversations with campesinos/as focused on how to ask
particular questions. For example the question “what do you think about autonomy?” may seem reasonable within the context of the research, however, such a question would be met with silence or a simplified “I don’t.” And so I discussed with people how to ask about autonomy, what type of questions I should ask about their struggle and resistance. This formed an important part of the dialogue I had with participants and assisted with keeping me accountable to different ways of thinking.

Indigenous farmers in the highlands consider themselves in resistance. I was told on a number occasions that the most basic element of this resistance was a refusal of the social programs, economic projects, and violence of the state. Resistencia autónoma (autonomous resistance) as farmers describe it is not a de jure relation with the state, but a de facto denial of state power and a rejection of the legitimacy of state power. Understanding the resistance of farmers in these communities helps to identify autonomy as a process, not as a thing. This is not autonomy granted by the state over a contiguous territory or granting of rights to a group of people, or state-recognition of their identities as indigenous people. Rather, this is rebellious self-declared autonomy that is embodied and put into practice by myriad actors, which is not explained by contemporary conversations about autonomy.

The struggles for autonomy in the highlands of Chiapas are not just attempts to create autonomous spaces with secure access to resources and that are free from government interference, but are also struggles for a diversity of political, economic, and social practices. For example, one farmer reported to me that: “autonomy is the most important part of the struggle. So we talk about the process of the struggle and make it a part of what forms in the mind of a way to understand indigenous life and the resistance.” For men and women as political actors in
communities, autonomy takes on a number of different forms; it is about space and it is also about cultivating secure and self-reliant livelihoods outside of state processes.

Part of this self-reliance is based in the cultivation of native corn, something that is an everyday agricultural practice and also something that is quite literally embodied by the indigenous Maya. Farmers in resistance are the bodies at the “sharp end” (cf. Dixon and Marston 2011:445), these bodies are made from native corn. Yet, corn is a subsistence crop which dominant narratives cast as a waste of agricultural land and a project that economic development will “fix.” Farmers in resistance are growing corn for food, for them, the ability to produce and consume corn, to labor and to reproduce their labor directly translates to autonomy and vice versa. Here, I have attempted a decolonial reading of these spaces of production and consumption to promote knowledges and understandings of autonomy and territory which upset the binaries of public versus private and the personal and political through examining the practice and embodiment of autonomy.

*Everyday Autonomies*

At the same time as farmers in resistance attempt to ignore state processes, self-declared autonomous communities are not homogenous enclaves free from government or external political interference. Moreover, different indigenous groups, supporters of official parties (*partidistas*), and even paramilitary members live in the same communities in the highlands. A self-declared autonomous community is not a territorially bounded place; it is a group of people who are struggling to withstand the state. The efforts of the government to destabilize *resistencia autónoma* takes many shapes. Here I discuss government efforts to incentivize people away from resistance through welfare programs and the privatization of communal lands. The autonomy
being practiced in the highlands is fashioned through resisting both the state’s measures of control and its violence.

By linking resistance to withstanding the state, campesinos/as demonstrate that struggles against the government that are taken up by actors within social movements are not a utopic existence. During the course of my time in the self-declared autonomous communities my inquiries about autonomy were not shaped as a diagnostic (put differently, I was not trying to determine if farmers in resistance had achieved autonomy or not), but were used as a way to capture how the struggle is made up of day-to-day activities of campesinos/as in resistance. Only through considering differences, practices, and how autonomy is embodied can we move beyond the “romance of resistance” (see: Casolo and Doshi 2013; Rose 2002; Sparke 2008) to render the experiences of farmers visible. Autonomy as a lived experience in the highlands of Chiapas is a multi-faceted process, and the everyday practices that make possible resistencia autónoma are linked to the participation of households in productive spaces, specifically spaces of food and agricultural production.

To ground this idea in place, I draw from an observation and informal conversations in my field notes from the summer of 2010 to illustrate what decisions are made in the context of resistencia autónoma and state intervention in the everyday.

This morning I could see a large gathering of people at the basketball court in the center of the community. I asked about it and was told that it was the government coming to give welfare to the partidistas. Soon I saw people climbing the hill from the court and returning to their homes, each member of the household laden down with bottles of Coca-Cola, cartons of chicken eggs, blankets and for some, rolled up, green, twin-sized mattresses… most autonomistas had left early [to avoid the government caravan] and gone to the fields to work. Later that evening while sharing elote [fresh corn], I asked if the government was giving out these items—they were not, vendors set up in town on these days and offer credit in addition to the government payout for people to purchase such items. The women
I was sitting with told me that the government money was very small, but it was enough to keep people loyal to the parties.

When I asked if it was difficult to see the government in their community an older campesino replied: “the bad government [reference to official state and federal governments] looks for ways to divide people and in their war they bomb us economically. The bad government buys people with bad houses and food; they look to buy-off peoples’ consciences. The bad government doesn’t know us. We are the resistance. The bad government has gotten to ‘unknow’ us…we live off our own sweat.”

This moment represents a piece of the struggle for campesinos/as in resistance. It shows the presence of the state government in self-declared autonomous zones and the ways government services and programs are used as tools of counter-insurgency (see: Mora 2008; 2015). It demonstrates the way the government works to lure people away from resistance movements with cash payment programs. It further indicates how farmers in resistance respond to the presence of the government in their communities, by peacefully ignoring the intrusion. Finally, it is a moment of everydayness that captures the practice and the process of the struggle through the production and consumption of corn. The work of producing and consuming corn is one way that using a feminist geopolitical lens we can consider how autonomy is embodied. Agriculture and agricultural products are intimately connected to the bodies of farmers in resistance and to the process of autonomy.

In addition to these uneven political terrains, farmers in resistance must contend with consistent government incursions through economic or infrastructural development initiatives targeted at partidistas. Evidence of government “improvement” of indigenous communities dots the landscape. Community health clinics and cultural centers for the sale of hand-made crafts for tourists traveling the government-declared “Mayan Route” chart the roads that lead to self-declared autonomous communities. Signs proclaiming state government investments with large
price tags, which include concrete floors, rural road paving, and running water are staged prominently along the route. In cases where the state or municipal government has entered communities to do large projects there have been incidents of conflict as spaces claimed by farmers in resistance are integrated into such projects without their consent.

Government interaction in highland communities increased dramatically following the 1994 Zapatista Uprising and especially with the introduction of the land titling program PROCEDE (Program of Certification of Ejidal Rights and the Titling of Family Units), which sought to privatize and parcel out communal land spaces to individual title-holders (Nuijten 2003; Stahler-Sholk 2007; Stephen 2002). As another component of neoliberal governance in the highlands PROCEDE is promoted as a way for communal land holders to have more economic freedom through land parcelization. By holding individual title farmers can use their land as an investment, as collateral for loans, or even for income through sale in times of great need (Stahler-Sholk 2007).

Farmers in resistance view PROCEDE as a new way to fragment communities and weaken communal decision-making processes. It is also viewed as a method to lure people away from subsistence and communal farming systems. Farmers in resistance are not unique in their dislike of the land titling program (see: Nuijten 2004). However, in communities where farmers in resistance make up a minority, some who oppose PROCEDE have been forced to align with the community majority in favor of land-titling. For example, it was reported to me that in one community where Las Abejas members were outnumbered by other groups, PROCEDE was passed in a meeting with state representatives—at the time of research, the farmers were waiting to receive their paper titles. Farmers explained to me that it was not what they wanted, but that they talked among themselves and agreed that no one would sell their title.
When prompted about community relations and how autonomy functioned under such threats, the division between community members and the parcelization of land were considered a matter-of-fact part of their struggle, their resistance. Often, as part of conversations about living under threat campesinos/as would simply respond: “so it is.” The spatial segregation and simultaneous proximity of those opposed to the resistance was considered a part of daily life. Instead of focusing on a contiguous form of territorial autonomy, for many of these farmers, land and corn became the language of autonomy and the medium for living in resistance. When I asked about autonomy and borders in the community a young campesino responded: “to speak a little about autonomy, it is work and it is life and it is living with people, we are looking for autonomy to live and produce. There’s nothing more than that. It is a way to live and to work.” Here autonomy is a lived experience.

Farmers in resistance live in deeply divided communities that comprise autonomy supporters as well as people who oppose autonomy and the social movements that are connected with it (the Zapatistas and Las Abejas). The situation of divided communities makes it difficult to define autonomous spaces within the context of bounded territory as there are not enclaves of different groups within communities. The struggle for autonomy is pronounced in the highlands as campesinos/as seek to put the politics of their movements into practice while negotiating opposition coming from within and outside their communities.

In many cases the dominant frame for viewing autonomy is still “trapped in territory,” assumed as a bounded and homogenous space (on territory see: Painter 2010). Yet falling back on such tropes tends to normalize and fix territory and autonomy as universals, even as work on territory demonstrates that it is not simply about bounded space (cf. Elden 2010; Painter 2010). Corn and coffee production occupy space, but it is a dynamic political landscape that is a relation
between farmers in resistance and agricultural plots. The very act of producing corn for subsistence and as a practice to build autonomy becomes political. The reordering of spaces in the highlands was not based in contained spaces, but in the identities of farmers both as indigenous and as subsistence producers. There remain people living in these communities that are not part of the resistance and this cultivates an uneven terrain of autonomy. For example, when I discussed community support for autonomy with farmers, they agreed that not everyone wanted autonomy. As one farmer remarked to me: “there are some who want the government here, not us, but there are some who don’t want the autonomy and there are some who do…there is not a line, there is not a border in the community, we live together.” This is an important point to pull out of my conversations with farmers: that an autonomous community is not a distinct self-governing unit, it is not a space defined by clear borders. Instead it is relational and dynamic. When asked about where autonomous spaces were many remarked that there were not bounded spaces; one farmer explained: “there is no border because we have many people and parcels of land in many different places, they are not all together and not all are close to the house.” Indeed, some farmers might walk up to an hour from their homes to gain access to their fields. Such divisions make up an important part of everyday life and practice and become spatially constituted activities.

The political tensions written into the landscape of politically and economically heterogeneous communities profoundly shape access to and use of productive spaces, and constrain the residents’ ability to navigate their communities. These tensions inscribe a borderless form of “cartographic violence” (Megoran 2006:632) on the highlands as campesinos/as in resistance must traverse spaces where people live and work who are partidistas (or make explicit choices to avoid those areas). In some cases, supporters of autonomy may live
in close proximity to households where members of paramilitaries—which threaten non-partidistas—reside. Farmers described a patchwork quilt of community autonomy where there were farming households who were in support of autonomy and where there were households that were not in support of autonomy (and there are also divisions within households). Autonomy is thus known and practiced by campesinos/as as a process and not as a demarcated space. It is not an autonomy that is determined by a contiguous, self-governed territory or ethnic identity, but one that is written into the landscape in complex and contested ways.

Agriculture as an Autonomous Act

Autonomy in Chiapas is an experience of the personal as political. To better understand the practice of autonomy, in this section I turn to thinking through agriculture as an autonomous act. Thinking about autonomy in this way allows us to connect the decisions that are made in the field to the ones made in the household; to attach political significance to the growing of corn for subsistence and coffee for income. Subsistence farming and peasant ways of knowing and understanding the world have long been marginalized and invisiblized. Indigenous communities in the highlands are viewed as sites of stagnation and backwardness by the state. In the 2013-2018 Gubernatorial State Plan, Governor Manuel Velasco Coello wrote that his government would help to “put Chiapas in the place that it deserves, away from backwardness and closer to prosperity. The road to a successful Chiapas implies that development, economic betterment and welfare are present in each of the homes of each Chiapaneco family…” (El Plan Estatal 2013:7). The identities of campesinos/as are delegitimized by the state through (mis)understandings of their livelihood practices. It is argued in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship that even while we critique the interventions of colonialism, “…the colonial epistemic monoculture is still
accepted nowadays as a symbol of development and modernity” (Santos 2007:xxxiii). Despite this framing, the milpa and the cafetal remain important spaces of agriculture and knowledge production in Chiapas. Knowledges of agricultural practice are built, but so too are knowledges of identity, resistance, and autonomy.

For campesinos/as in resistance, everyday decisions and the concrete, embodied practice of their struggle are based in the space of the fields, in daily productive practices, cooking and consumption, as well as the harvest. In the highlands there is one cycle of corn per year and one cycle of coffee. The season of corn is May to October and the coffee harvest takes place from December to March. However, the fields are maintained on a daily basis throughout the year. Thus daily decision-making is based on prioritizing coffee or corn and is balanced with household, community, and political responsibilities.

Participation as an actor in a social movement takes time away from the fields. The positions that people volunteer for in civilian governance, in their communities, and in collective production (such as in coffee cooperatives) take up precious time. When discussing corn purchasing habits a member of the leadership for an autonomous municipality disclosed that “here we have enough land, but we also have a lot of work for the struggle, if we could always be working in the field we could have enough food.” The practice of autonomy for farmers in resistance in the highlands is linked to agricultural production and is complicated by their participation in social movement politics and cooperative production (particularly fair trade coffee). All of these activities exist on a continuum of autonomy processes that contribute to the resistance of campesinos/as. Autonomy is produced on a daily basis through the cultivation, harvest, and consumption of corn for subsistence and coffee for income.
Families work together in the milpa. Yet many times I saw the elder men from a household in the cafetal, (which under standards for fair trade certification restrict family labor), while women and young children remained in the milpa. Corn is an essential element of campesino/a identity, community self-sufficiency and cultural and political autonomy, yet it is in direct competition with coffee, which takes up valuable land and time. Coffee too, though, is an important element of autonomy as it provides a solidarity network for farmers both locally and globally. This network is comprised of local and regionally grounded coffee-producing cooperatives as well as international groups that purchase the coffee produced in self-declared autonomous communities and attempt through the sale of their coffee to consumers in the U.S., Europe, and Japan, to tell the stories of the struggles that farmers face as they seek to build autonomy. The sale of coffee also provides much needed cash income for the purchase of items that cannot be produced at home and for the purchase of food in the lean months when food storage is exhausted (cf. Bacon et al. 2014).

The cafetal makes up an important time and space commitment for farmers as it must be maintained throughout the year and especially before and after the harvest. As part of their commitment to organic production farmers use compost derived from the previous year harvest debris and farmers “clean” (weed) the fields with a machete and/or a hoe at least three times a year. With a hoe, it takes a family about 1-2 months to clean a one-hectare plot, with a machete the labor-time is counted in weeks. Although coffee production takes up valuable land space and time, it is also an essential agriculturally-based component of how autonomy is practiced in the highlands. One farmer jested: “you can’t eat coffee, but you can get a little money for it.” The production of coffee is not unique to farmers in resistance. In the highlands almost every household has evidence of coffee production during the harvest (mainly beans laid out to dry on
any available surface). However, for campesinos/as in resistance it is considered an important practice. When chatting about fair trade coffee production, a farmer noted: “all the work of agricultural production is the base of the life and the struggle for autonomy. The milpa is more important, but the production of coffee or honey is important for economics….” It is a strategy for maintaining their struggle and a resource for international networks, above all it is a safety net, because although self-sufficiency in food production is a fundamental component of the autonomy process it is often not realized.

Despite the important role of coffee, consistently in conversations corn was considered the most fundamental component of resistencia autónoma. As one farmer explained to me: “our insurrection could not continue without our corn.” Another farmer echoed these remarks, describing to me that “the milpa [cornfield] is part of richness and our life, but it is also part of the struggle of our organization, it is a part of our resistance and a part of our autonomy.” Self-sufficiency in corn production was consistently viewed as the most important part of their struggle. When discussing autonomy with a group of farmers I received a number of responses that were tied to self-reliance:

We understand autonomy as a big thing, it is many things, we have autonomy in many things and the organization talks about autonomy of the people, it is independence, it is self-determination, it is to not have dependence on outside things…

It is autonomy of our culture and in this culture there are many things. The most important is the agricultural production of the campesino—if we don’t have it, if we have to depend on a company, or if we have to buy agrochemicals or seeds…

Production is the most important thing, to produce, not to buy.

We can’t have contamination of transgenics here, but in many other parts we know that they are experimenting and it’s a way to control that territory, they control it with transgenic seeds, but this cannot be autonomy.
Here, autonomy is relative to state and economic actors. The discourses of *resistencia autónoma* resonate in these responses and are clearly sedimented in the community of *campesinos/as*, yet always it came back to corn. To have land to cultivate their own seeds, live off their land and consume their native corn. To discuss corn in a self-declared autonomous community was to discuss autonomy. Autonomy is simultaneously produced and understood as an agricultural practice free from interference. Again this points to considering autonomy not as a thing, but as a lived process understood through a prism of activities and knowledges.

**Towards Reframing Autonomy**

In this paper I have examined different ways of knowing and understanding autonomy through the practice and embodiment of *resistencia autónoma* in self-declared autonomous communities. The localized and productive practices and ways of understanding autonomy are both linked to social movement political discourses and also individual struggles. In seeking to ground these knowledges I have sought a rethinking of autonomy, not as a universal, but as multiplied, carving out a space for those processes and practices that are rendered invisible. In reframing autonomy I have argued that we must move beyond narrowed and universalizing understandings of political concepts and practices and seek other ways of examining the geopolitics of knowledge.

Geographies of autonomy locate the state and territory as key actors, yet when autonomy is performed in self-declared autonomous communities in highland Chiapas, it is an agricultural practice that is negotiated as part of contentious and often violent relations with the state and other non-state actors. Above all, for farmers in resistance, autonomy is a relation with agricultural production and consumption. It is about growing (and consuming) coffee and corn
and establishing political, social, and economic relations that are endogenous to the discourses sedimented in their communities and that assists with cultivating secure lives and livelihoods.

These perspectives are critical to understanding how the discourses of autonomy are produced and reproduced by campesinos/as in resistance. Autonomy is not just an ordering (or disordering—as the case may be) of space, but a pluriversal and productive experience for farmers in the highlands who are linked up with larger social movements. Working with corn and coffee, navigating contentious community spaces, and redefining resistance establish a “proximity” of autonomy for campesinos/as (see: Hyndman 2007). It is in day-to-day living; in the production of food and cash-crops, the consumption of their corn and their identities as indigenous corn farmers. The cultivation of corn for subsistence and coffee for the international marketplace allows farmers to withstand the violence against them, create autonomous processes and to resist the state. If we look only to western-centric, disembodied, and geopolitical understandings of autonomy the knowledges of farmers are rendered invisible.

If we are to ask new questions and to perceive more clearly those places, peoples, and practices that geography is concerned with, a reframing of autonomy is critical. I offer here the feminist and decolonial as potential ways to move toward a reframing, for there are a multitude of practices caught up in the projects of autonomy and many ways of knowing and understanding the same. Putting feminist geopolitics in conversation with the decolonial conceivably provides an interdisciplinary lens for geographers seeking to extend dialogue beyond the discipline. The understandings of autonomy that I have developed in this paper can contribute to broader debates over territory, state-indigenous and state-peasant relations, as well as resistance. Moreover, a reframing of autonomy provides an opportunity to build new foundations for scholarly work in other empirical contexts outside of everyday agricultural practices and highland, Chiapas.
Finally, a feminist, decolonial engagement is an intervention *and* an invitation to examine practices, performance and other(s) that we might usually overlook.
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This change is not unlike what Mikesell and Murphy argued regarding minority-group desires to withdraw from the state, progressing from recognition, access and participation to separation, autonomy and independence (1991:582).

2 The 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and the subsequent COCOPA law (for more detailed accounts see: Mora 2008; Simonelli and Earle 2003; Stephen 1997; 2002; Stahler-Sholk 2004) that sought to institutionalize indigenous rights and peace between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government, were negotiated even while the state and paramilitaries waged a continuous low-intensity war against rebellious indigenous groups (Mora 2008; Nash 2001; Stahler-Sholk 1998; Stephen 2002; Tavanti 2003).

3 There is a rich body of literature on Zapatista governance that I do no seek to replicate here; see: Barmmeyer 2008; Baronnet et al. 2011; Earle and Simonelli 2005; Mora 2008; Stahler-Sholk 2010.

4 A phrasing that I attribute to Alec Murphy.

5 A detailed discussion of decolonial approaches including: coloniality/modernity, the colonial difference, and the coloniality of power is beyond the scope of this paper; see: Alcoff 2006; Grosfoguel 2002; 2007; 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2000; 2005; 2011; Quijano 1997; 2007; 2008; Vallega 2014; Walsh 2007

6 For the purpose of maintaining the anonymity of participants, community and interviewee names are not used here. Interviews and group discussions were held in Spanish—or in Tzotzil with concurrent translation and interpretation in Spanish—and were translated from Spanish to English by the author.

7 Accounts from NGO workers describe such sites as publicity stunts. One worker claimed that a new state health clinic on the Mayan Route was not staffed, supplied or ever open, but provided a ribbon cutting appearance for the Governor.

8 Volunteer positions and communal work are long-standing traditions in Mayan communities (Nash 2001). Systems of cargo (literally: “burden”) were in place long before the resistance.