“Racing the Reservation: Geopolitics of Identity and Development in the Navajo Nation.”

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By official definitions, American Indian reservations are political, legal territories, both separate from – but also intimately interior to – the United States. In the popular imagination, they are notoriously “underdeveloped”: as many have argued, they are America’s own, homegrown “Fourth World.” As rural geopolitical spaces they embody two important contradictions: first, although “sovereign,” the land itself is held “in trust” by the federal government, a subversion of capitalist private real estate in exchange for socialized healthcare and education; and second, though federally recognized tribes are granted reservations on the basis of natives’ historical & political difference, the “logic” of settler colonialism repackages this difference in racialized terms, in the language of blood and skin. Today, Native identity politics often hinge on proving authenticity through geography: “real” Indians come from, and reside on, “the rez.” American Indians then became a “racial minority” in Census forms, simultaneously racializing indigeneity and depoliticizing long land tenure, posing the ever-present threat of future dispossession. Specifically, this paper considers the Navajo (Diné) Nation’s reservation as a racialized, rural space, unique and yet emblematic for indigenous experiences today, given the insecurity felt by tribal leaders as they negotiate the future of tribal sovereignty in a settler colonial context. To mitigate
this insecurity, Diné leaders have pursued the mining and export of fossil fuels from their land as a method of revenue for the tribal economy that immediately renders the reservation just as “global” as it is “local.” However, meeting the endless energy demands of Phoenix, Arizona is at least partially an historical response to decades of exploitation under the Cold War economy for uranium and coercions into below-market coal deals during the termination-era. As such, the Navajo reservation’s complicated political ecological history poses a challenge to standard scripts of modernity that see development as an “attack” on indigenous peoples, who are, in turn understood through two main tropes: as either “victims” of development (passive, lacking agency, sacrifices of Manifest Destiny) or as “resisters” to development (natural revolutionaries, the return of the Noble Savage). These tropes – and the many forms of violence they produce – are part of the persistent discourse of development. In both cases, these tropes present anti-modern subjects: indigenous peoples are presented as either overcome by technology, or inherently opposed to technology. And finally, crucially, in both cases, “development” comes from the outside. I propose instead a way to see the complexities of simultaneous suffering and renewal in the lived experience of the racialized, rural space of the Navajo Nation. These complexities – entangled as they are with reservation landscapes – are part of 21st century nation-building processes of American Indian Nations more broadly, where “development” is never a unilateral force. And where, increasingly, development (or alternative practices some might call “development”) is being taken up endogenously as a way to transform the structural violence of settler colonialism.