# Taking over Indigeneity: Sovereignty as Negotiation in Mexico

*Carlos A. Batista*

***Abstract:*** *This article examines the 2020 takeover of the main building of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI) in Mexico City by a Zapatista organization known as the Otomí Community. Going against culturalist understandings of what in Mexico is called "Indigenous autonomy" (which see it as a fight against the state), I suggest that in the case of the Otomí it is possi- ble to see the quest for sovereignty as materially grounded in the demand for basic infrastructures. Sovereignty is here rooted on a navigation of relations with the Mexican state—it is not an oppo- sition to statist development altogether.1*

***Keywords:*** *Indigeneity, infrastructure, sovereignty, Mexico, Zapatismo*

On October 12, 2020 (Columbus Day) eighty families known as the Otomí Community—who work as street vendors and live in occupied housing in Mexico City—took over the main building of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI), inaugurating a squat that is still standing at the time of writing. They have given it several names: the "White Elephant," the "Monster's Entrails," and the "Samir Flores Soberanes House of the Peoples," in honor of the activist murdered in 2019 for fighting the construction of a thermoelectric plant in the state of Morelos. As part of the occupation, the Otomí Community covered the white walls of the INPI with banners promoting the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), a grassroots political organization created in 1996 as part of the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). They also included banners asking for "Dignified Housing for the Otomí Community," denouncing paramilitary attacks on autonomous Zapatista communities in the state of Chiapas, and criticizing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)'s main infrastructural projects, which include the Dos Bocas Oil Refinery in the state of Tabasco, the Inter-Oceanic Corridor in the Tehuantepec Isthmus, and the Mayan Train in the Yucatan Peninsula.

This text interprets the INPI takeover as more than a defense of informal housing or squatting, more than a set of demands in favor of the labor rights

of street vendors, and more than an organized protest against AMLO's megaprojects. I argue that the INPI take- over embodied a set of understandings about righteousness and Indigeneity that included demands in favor of the environment, against the privatization of public spaces, in defense of Indigenous regions across Mexico, and against state-sponsored extractivism. Going against studies of urban poverty in Mexico that center on class instead of race,[2] I propose to conceptualize a Mexico City movement for housing and labor rights as quintessentially Indigenous and as an unnamed quest for Indigenous sovereignty. Building on work on the anthropology of infrastructure,[3] I underscore the fact that the negotia- tion of material rights granted by the state may become entwined with the quest for political sovereignty. This means that acquiring sover- eignty rights does not mean securing autonomy from the state, but rather securing the state's provision of material and economic rights. My understanding of sovereignty similarly draws on work in political anthropology where sovereignty has been defined as an embodied and affective formation that requires navigation on behalf of subjects.[4]

My treatment of Indigenous sovereignty stems from work by Kevin Bruyneel, Jessica Cattelino, and Audra Simpson, who concep- tualize sovereignty as a "third space" lying neither inside nor outside of the American state;[5] characterized by a "double bind" that brings together need-based attachments with a rejection of the state;[6] and pierced through by a notion of "refusal," where traditional state-based agreements are rejected from the start.[7] Bruyneel and Cattelino's treat- ment of Indigeneity, in particular, is characterized by their framing of an in-betweenness where Indigeneity is neither recognized as lying outside any particular political formation, nor understood as being within. In *The Third Space of Sovereignty* (2007), Bruyneel argues that attempts to secure casino rights by California tribes throughout the late 1990s and 2000s were characterized by tribes' negotiations with the California government, where anti-tribal discourse succeeded in granting Arnold Schwarzenegger the 2003 election.[8] These nego- tiations were pierced through by the divergent definitions of sover- eignty held by the tribes and the US federal government: while the tribes expect the federal government to recognize their sovereignty, the federal government claims that it already does; yet historical relations since the late nineteenth century have increasingly undermined said sovereignty.[9]

Similarly, in "The Double Bind of American Indian Need-Based Sovereignty" (2010), Cattelino has argued that American Indian nations need economic resources to exercise their right to sovereignty. As these resources often come from the federal government, the tribes' exercise of economic rights is generally questioned by the US settler society.[10] In these two treatments, Indigenous sovereignty appears poised between the claim for sovereignty and the tribes' attachments to the US settler state. It is Native Americans' dual position between these two attachments what constitutes their

political articulations. In another approach to the Indigenous question in North America, Audra Simpson has explored Native Americans' "refusal" of participating in settler polities, where their existence within the US and Canadian terri- torial borders creates a need to navigate political identities.[11] Building on these three theorizations of Indigenous sovereignty, I propose approaching the Mexico City Otomí Community through the lens of a sovereignty that is always doubly bound—both to a refusal of the Mexican settler state, and to the attempt to gain recognition from it.

The study of the Otomí in Mexico has mainly focused on their existence as a society that migrated[12] to Mexico City from the 1950s onwards to escape economic deprivation in the central states of Hidalgo, Querétaro, and Mexico. Arizpe's work, in particular, explains that people coming into Mexico City from Otomí and Mazahua towns spent their days asking for charity, doing construction work, and selling vegetables in the streets.[13] They lived in the "lost cities" (self-constructed housing) of the southern borough of Coyoacán (where the INPI is located). While the study of the urban poor in Mexico City has gener- ally focused on their "informality" in economic and political terms, I argue that it is also possible to examine it along ethnic lines, treating the Otomí Community as an Indigenous movement that framed their economic and political problems in terms of Indigenous belonging. Importantly, the Otomí Community did not take over the Mexico City Housing Institute (Invi), where they have been negotiating land titling for years, but over the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples.[14] The Community's main ally, the Emiliano Zapata Popular Revolutionary Union (UPREZ), is not only a working-class housing organization but also an expressed ally of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). In the summer and autumn of 2021, with the INPI takeover still going on, members of the Otomí Community took part in the "Journey for Life," a tour through Europe organized by the CNI and the EZLN to re-launch their plat- form globally.[15]

This text interprets the INPI takeover from the perspective of the quest for Indigenous sovereignty. In North America, there has been a renewed interest in questions that were previously explored by Native American studies and critical Indigenous studies, including a focus on the concepts of settler colonialism and sovereignty as analytical axes for the study of Indigeneity and a centering on questions of land, infrastructure, and citizenship rights as elements that are inherently linked to the cultural experiences of ethnicity and discrimination. In a recent article published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2022), Jessica Cattelino and Audra Simpson have argued that the focus on the concept of sovereignty as was originally taken up by Native American studies and critical Indigenous studies was expanded in the two decades after 9/11 to discuss the sovereignty of settler states.[16] These authors define sovereignty as the legal jurisdiction over a territory and a people, and as political authority and distinctiveness. To Cattelino and Simpson, however,

focusing on the practices of settler states has erased the sovereignty of Indigenous nations in political anthropology. Attempting to depart from settler states' sovereignty entails concep- tualizing Indigenous sovereignties as being "nested" within broader polities,[17] split between "refusal" and need-based attachment.[18] Building on Cattelino and Simpson's proposition, the INPI takeover could be framed as part of a broader a quest for Indigenous sovereignty on behalf of the Otomí Community. Although generally the concept mobilized by Indigenous groups in Mexico is the search for *autonomy*, defined as juridical leeway within the federal system, I suggest the push is conceptually similar to North American Indigenous peoples seeking legal recognition of their sovereignty vis-à-vis settler states.

The text is based on a year and a half of in-person and online ethnographic work (2020–2021) with the INPI occupants in Mexico City, and a parallel grassroots movement pushing forward initia- tives of Indigenous autonomy (*autonomía indígena*) in two towns of central Mexico's Otomí region, which I will call San Miguel and San Juan. Fieldwork in the Otomí region included participant observation at an "intercultural" nongovernmental organization that served as a university for Otomí students. I divide my argument into two sections. The first section explains the meaning of Indigenous autonomy using ethnographic encounters at the intercultural organization in the town in San Miguel, while also discussing understandings of Indigenous sovereignty in the Anglophone world. The second section analyzes several public events organized by the Otomí Community at the INPI takeover, as well as interviews conducted with its members. The essay attempts to show that, among the many meanings that were attributed to Indigeneity throughout my fieldwork, the INPI takeover embodied a resignified Indigenous righteousness emanating from Zapatismo and embodying the desire for sovereignty without explicitly naming it, linking it to the demand for basic material rights. This materially anchored sovereignty clashed with White and Mestizo notions of multiculturalism and "decolonization" at the intercultural organi- zation, which saw "indigenous autonomy" as a separation from the state. This elite definition of decolonization could be interpreted under what Audra Simpson[19] and Elizabeth Povinelli[20] have termed "liberal power"—a desire to classify, order, and differentiate for the sake of settlement and capital.

## AUTONOMOUS, SOVEREIGN, RACIALLY CARED FOR

Before the INPI takeover occurred in October 2020, I was doing field- work at an intercultural nongovernmental organization in the Otomí town of San Miguel. I attempted to understand how Indigeneity on the ground was turned into an issue to be managed, governed, and cared for. The members of the organization where I worked were members of the (mostly White) middle class and came from Mexico City and the city of Querétaro. The intercultural organization had been created in the early 1980s by Catholic

nuns from the Religious of the Assumption to assist in poverty mitigation. In the early 2000s, it was passed over to experts in intercultural education to expand research on the Otomí region, teach the Otomí language, and help generate agroecological and solidarity economy practices. Although no longer Catholic, it remained linked to a large, private Jesuit university in Mexico City.[21]

During my first week of fieldwork in June 2020, the director of the organization received a call. He put it on speaker phone because he thought it might be important for the rest of the volunteers to hear. The words "Wait for the blow" (*Esperen el putazo*) came through the phone. A lawyer who had previously worked at the organization and had left unhappy with its inner workings was calling to let us know he had helped the local government win a legal case of Indigenous autonomy for the town. His wording suggested that he knew the autonomy sentence would disrupt the organization. He was right, because what followed seemed like an inside crisis. After hanging up the phone, the director of the organization said that he saw three problems with the Indigenous autonomy case: "Division, authoritarianism, and develop- mentalism!" He told us that this was not "participatory democracy" and that we needed to teach the locals about "alternatives to devel- opment," "So they are aware that autonomy *does not mean [President] López Obrador coming here to build his public works*!" Antonio, as I will call him, went on to say that if this went through, the government would "cover everything with concrete, all the way up to the water- falls!" They would make San Miguel look like "Tolantongo," a nearby tourist center known for its excess of concrete and lower-income visitors. Instead, we should make sure that Indigenous autonomy was conducted in a way that was "plural" and "participatory," avoiding the "shithouse" that might come if the local government was put in charge of this.

The volunteers were angry about the fact that the Indigenous autonomy case had been won without their involvement and with the support of a local authority belonging to the National Regeneration Movement (Morena), the current governing party in Mexico. Morena can be defined as a widely popular movement that has decreased poverty rates in the country, but has faced backlash from intellectuals, civil society organizations, and Indigenous groups for excessively centering power in the figure of the president and the military, and for sidelining international treaties and best practices.[22] As it arrived in power in 2018, Morena announced that it would inaugurate a "post-neoliberal" era that centered "the people" as a political subject,[23] declaring all major infrastructural works as militarized and as matters of "national security interest."[24] The volunteers, then, were angry that Indigenous autonomy, as led by Morena, would bring about *public works*, *concrete*, and *development* in their populist forms.

Indigenous autonomy is defined as a legal recourse that was made possible by a 2001 reform to the Mexican Constitution, which was considered a diluted version of the San Andrés Accords that were signed by the federal

government and the EZLN in 1996.[25] Although Indigenous self-determination as defined in the 2001 reform did not mean much more than recognizing Zapatista localities that were already de facto autonomous, a 2011 Supreme Court case asked that the Purépecha town of Cherán in the central-western state of Michoacán be declared autonomous based on this same reform and on the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, which Mexico had ratified in 1990. While Cherán's autonomy has been interpreted as a local political move intended to expel organized crime from the town,[26] autonomy—which in Cherán translated to budgetary autonomy from the state of Michoacán and a direct allocation in the federal budget—has allowed infrastructural improvements and a significant power re-balancing vis-à-vis the state of Michoacán.[27] So why was indigenous autonomy viewed with suspicion by the volun- teers with whom I worked with? If it was done "participatorily," would it then be *appropriate*?

The night after the phone call, I talked to another volunteer, Mauricio, at the organization's agroecological garden. We were standing under a starry sky. He was smoking a joint and asking that I take a puff when he told me that autonomy should be conducted "from love, from collective bodies, like in Cherán." Autonomy could not be conducted "from violence, from the state, with everything that it [the state] implies." He added that he had been reading some things on how "autonomy can be connected to the individual, about what autonomy means for individual freedom," since freedom is something "that is often lost in the collective" (*que se pierde en lo colectivo*). He also suggested that I read *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari, which to him spoke about "autonomy at the individual level."[28] Mauricio finished his explanation with, "It's important to have this in one's head—How the religious, the incommensurate, *clash with the individual*. And that's a contradiction." The "religious and the incom- mensurate" were his way of phrasing the political and the collective.

Autonomy was interpreted by this activist in individual terms, as that which would free the subject from the state. Confusing the notion of autonomy with the liberation of the individual stood in the way of volunteers' interpreting Indigenous autonomy as a demand for Indigenous sovereignty and as a negotiation of material rights with the state. If, following Cattelino and Simpson, sovereignty is defined as the legal jurisdiction over a territory and a people, and as political authority and distinctiveness,[29] the push for Indigenous autonomy could be interpreted precisely as an attempt on behalf of the Otomí to increase control over their own territory and population. The volun- teers' anti-statism, mixed with a desire for Indigenous salvation, led them to conceptualize a move for political sovereignty as essentially an individualizing ideal.

In Joseph Masco and Deborah Thomas's interpretation, sovereignty may be read as an affective and embodied force that goes beyond the state, resting rather on subjects' attempts of *surrendering* and *surviving* vis-à-vis the forces of

power.[30] Lauren Berlant has proposed something similar in their approach to sovereignty as "lateral agency," where "slow death" is defined as the slow killing of the population, and sovereignty is understood as the nonmimetic fight for personal and practical leeway.[31] While this was precisely what Mauricio was trying to describe to me, in the Otomí's own framing this quest for sovereignty was turned into a demand on the state, which included both refusal of the state's current practices and negotiation with its forces. It was not the Otomí's rejection of the Morena government what led them to collaborate in the takeover of the INPI four months after the events at the intercultural organization, but rather their understanding of the state as a body that would eventually provide for them, once they demanded their rights by force. It is this materiality of desire that I suggest can be read through the lens of Indigenous sovereignty.

A third encounter revealed what Indigenous autonomy repre- sented in its grassroots form and how it opposed "interculturality" and liberalism in the minds of my interlocutors. At a breakfast that I had at Antonio's house to discuss the Indigenous autonomy case, he told me that he did not agree with a recently published book on poverty in the rural areas of central Mexico. We were surrounded by shelves filled with books on solidarity economics as I listened to him explain that the recently published book did not align with the notion of "good living" (*buen vivir* or *sumak kawsay*), a Bolivian-Ecuadoran banner used by South American Indigenous movements to counter developmentalist projects. "Good living" entailed recognizing that Indigenous peoples were "already wealthy" because of the lands they own, their relationship to the land, and their culture. Antonio also told me that he did not recommend my researching of grassroots Otomí politics in San Miguel and the neighboring town of San Juan because "those people didn't really respect the law." His interpretation of poli- tics in the Otomí region essentially countered the push for Indigenous autonomy as it had been organized by grassroots movements, which to him stood outside the law. Indigenous autonomy, to him, could only be conducted appropriately if it went through his organization.

If we frame the Otomí's quest for autonomy as a quest for political sovereignty—given that it promised to free the town of San Miguel from the budgetary constraints of the municipal and state govern- ments, granting the town a direct budgetary line through the federal government—their political demands can also be interpreted through the lens of North American critical Indigenous studies and not solely through the volunteers' defense of anti-developmentalism. By framing Indigenous autonomy as a quest for sovereignty, it is also possible to interpret it as a search for material gains effectively provided by the state, not simply as a request to separate from the state altogether. This interpretation would bring the Otomí's quest close to Audra Simpson's theorizations of a "nested sovereignty," where political subjects have learned to navigate their relation both to their first nation and to settler polities.[32] The Otomí's quest for sovereignty can also be interpreted

along the lines of Cattelino's need-based sovereignty,[33] where attach- ments to the first nation are not compromised by economic naviga- tions with settler states.[34]

What emerged in the intercultural organization's criticisms of the Indigenous autonomy process was a tutelar component that over- looked forms of navigating sovereignty, instead hinging on a process of racial care. This tension could be seen as stemming from the multi- culturalist ideals that the organization had been founded on, which Elizabeth Povinelli criticizes in her proposition that the culturalist approaches of the 1990s to the Indigenous question displaced other forms of political demands and belonging.[35] Although multicultur- alism and the "right to culture" it entails have been instrumentalized by activists and grassroots organizations to secure access to other sorts of rights,[36] the quest for Indigenous sovereignty should be understood as affectively navigated by the Otomí and as continuously negotiated with the state. It was this element of the search for sovereignty in rela- tion to the state that the organization volunteers continuously over- looked, seeing Indigenous autonomy as something they should be able to govern from outside the state, even in opposition to it.

Figure 1. A streetlight in the city of Querétaro features an Otomí rag doll known as Lelé, the symbol of multiculturalism in the region. The sign was added to streetlights in 2021. Photo by author.

## STATE ATTACHMENTS AND NEGOTIATED SOVEREIGNTY

Three months after the events I analyzed in the first section, the INPI building in Mexico City was taken over by the Otomí Community as part of a protest against Columbus Day. Taking advantage of the almost empty office building that remained secured by COVID-19- related restrictions,[37] the Otomí Community walked into the building with megaphones and ordered the remaining personnel to leave, telling them they were simply staging a temporary sit-in, although their plan was to remain until they secured land titles from the local government. After migrating from the town of San Juan in the 1990s, the Otomí Community had lived in plots of land and buildings aban- doned after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, located in the now-fash- ionable neighborhoods of Roma and Juárez. One group inhabited a 1900s French-style mansion in the streets of Roma and Londres that had been the seat of the exiled Spanish Republic (1939–75), which had collapsed halfway and was further damaged in a 2017 earthquake.[38] Another group inhabited another damaged building in the street of Zacatecas, and a third group a plot of land in the street of Guanajuato. Many remained linked through kinship to the towns of San Juan and San Miguel.

Immediately after they occupied the INPI in October 2020, the Otomí Community organized several public forums that included councilmembers of the grassroots National Indigenous Congress (CNI) from several regions in Mexico. The forums were held at the conference room on level 6 (next to the empty office of INPI director Adelfo Regino), at the parking lot on the ground floor, or on the side- walk next to the building. Aside from their denouncements of state abuse and the occupants' demands, I will focus on how the events taking place inside the INPI showcased a particular relation to the state. It was not just a display of outrage towards the treatment that the Otomí Community had received for decades. It was also a strategy for patronage and instrumentalization, where the occupants set out to get *whatever they could* from the state. In demanding that Mexico City's government recognize their land titles and provide city funding for housing construction, the Otomí were negotiating what they constantly referenced as their right to the city.[39] At the same time, they asked that the town of San Juan be granted Indigenous autonomy—not through Morena as it had happened in San Miguel, but through Zapatista orga- nizations in the area. This knot brought together sovereignty with the acquisition of state-guaranteed material rights. Additionally, the Otomí requested access to healthcare, education, and the right to work as street vendors.

The parking lot behind the INPI was where the Otomí Community, assisted by a working-class housing organization known as the Emiliano Zapata Popular Revolutionary Union (UPREZ), had installed a gas stove, tables, a stone oven, and cement laundry boards. It was also used by children as playground, and as the space where meetings were held and videos were shown. One night in November 2020, I was sitting in the INPI parking lot

with a man I will call Luis, who I had met while doing fieldwork in San Juan months before. He had come to support the takeover, and to add the demands of people still living in San Juan to those of the Mexico City Otomí Community. We were watching a documentary film UPREZ had brought dealing with the 2019 murder of activist Samir Flores in the state of Morelos. In the film,[40] President López Obrador says that Flores was a (right-wing) "reactionary," that he was looking for trouble, and *that* is how he got killed. After the film ended, I approached Luis, the man I was sitting with, to do a formal interview. He told me the story of his life, as it involved his wife, who I will call Laura, being imprisoned unjustly in 2008 for having allegedly kidnapped six agents of the now extinct Federal Agency of Investigation (AFI). In a nationally renowned case,[41] Laura was imprisoned without proof after having defended a street market where she worked from a seizure of pirate discs by the AFI.[42] Sitting in the parking lot of a building that was taken forcefully from the federal government, my interviewee looked at me with terror in his eyes and asked, "What if what happened to him [Samir Flores] happens to us?"

The terror that I saw that night in my interviewee's eyes—and felt for a split second in my stomach—pointed out the profound state of "refusal"[43] felt by Indigenous and non-governmental organizations working to defend rights from state practices that are often seen as both colonialist and authoritarian. In arguing that activism is a form of theorizing, Erin Pineda suggests that rights-based movements are decolonizing practices where alternative sites emerge for constructing the political.[44] In paying ethnographic attention to the events inside the INPI and the speeches given by Otomí Community and CNI members, I follow the double pull of demands for state-based assistance as they became entwined with the refusal to the state's business as usual. This double pull was entirely within what Cattelino called the "double bind" of the American Indian need-based sovereignty.[45] Even as the Otomí refused the Mexican state because they saw its operations as systemically racist (for instance, they refused welfare payments), they wanted the state to recognize and guarantee the Otomí's rights to access basic services like housing, education, and healthcare, as well as the autonomy of the towns where they came from. Although they had learned to provide these things for themselves from the Zapatista experience, their requests at the INPI entwined the desire for San Juan's recognition as autonomous with demands that the state assist them in recognizing land titles and supervising housing construction works in Mexico City's central area. In thinking about the survival of attachments to the nation-state amidst the push for radical demands,[46] one can see that the Otomí were negotiating sovereignty that existed always in fraught tension with the settler state.

In June 2021, eight months after the INPI takeover had begun, I attended a Morena rally in a colonial city I will call Manantial, the capital city of the municipality to which both San Miguel and San Juan belong. The rally was the final event of the 2021 mid-term electoral cycle, where candidates of left-wing

Morena, the center-right National Action Party (PAN), and Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) contended for the posts of governor of the state of Querétaro, munic- ipal president of Manantial, and several local authorities known as *delegaciones*. At the event, I ran into Laura and Luis, who I mentioned above as participants in the INPI takeover. In the middle of the packed parking lot where the campaign event was taking place, Laura and Luis were each pushing an ice cream cart (their family business), holding umbrellas to protect them from the blistering sun. I stood next to Laura, taking notes while I listened to a speech by a Morena guber- natorial candidate. Laura complained that an event organizer had approached her to let her know street vendors were not welcome, and then said, nodding towards the Morena candidate, "I hope he [López Obrador] wins. Because *if he wins, he will give us autonomy*." Here the gubernatorial candidate symbolized both Morena and the president of Mexico, as well as the claims for social justice that brought Morena to power in 2018. Laura's attachment was within what Cattelino terms the schizophrenic element of the double bind. Profoundly affected by state authoritarianism and prejudices against street vendors in 2008, Laura was a part of the movement demanding San Juan's Indigenous autonomy, yet saw promise in a Morena government as a left-wing populist movement that offered to save her as a member of "the people."

What this exchange made evident was that López Obrador and the Mexican state were not (just) seen as hideous evildoers by Indigenous movements and nongovernmental organizations. They were also the promise of a future. While Luis had told me he feared what the state had done to Samir Flores (and to Laura back in 2008), Laura told me that López Obrador was their chance. They feared him, but he was also seen as having the ability to save things. The fact that the San Miguel autonomy case discussed in the first section was pushed from within Morena also meant that Indigenous autonomy was being mobilized both inside and outside Morena. At that moment in time, Morena was also proposing an Indigenous rights constitutional reform that promised to bring "autonomy" (mainly understood as federal budgetary allocations and relative independence from state budgets) to all Indigenous localities in the country.[47] This initiative promised to make Indigenous peoples the subjects of collective rights and guar- antee the rights to autonomy and self-determination proposed in the 2001 Indigenous Rights Bill, although it faced severe backlash from Zapatista organizations (like the Otomí Community) for ignoring them in the preparation of the reform.[48]

Going back to the CNI events that took place at the INPI in Mexico City, the Otomí Community's demands entailed denouncing the racist state, but also a constant push-and-pull that saw the state as having the ability (and the obligation) to save them. To illustrate this point, I will discuss fragments of three INPI speeches given by Otomí Community and CNI members, focusing particularly on their affec- tive relation to the state. In an event in November 2020, for instance, Osbelia Quiroz, a Nahua CNI councilwoman for the town of Tepoztlán (state of Morelos), defined Indigenous peoples' problems as an

issue for President López Obrador to solve. Specifically claiming that the left-wing Morena government should be in charge of "making things change," Quiroz also explained that it was the President's role to "give out the order for the people in charge to accomplish their mission." Quiroz called bureaucrats (the regular occupants of the INPI) lazy and corrupt, but also said they should do something to help the Indigenous people of Mexico now that they were being governed by a President from the left. At the same time, AMLO was also said "to have forgotten about the peoples," even if with his victory, "the people" were meant to have come to power. Quiroz finished her speech by claiming that AMLO should "talk to his wife," a historian who could explain to him the importance of Indigenous populations.[49]

The division between what AMLO was being asked to do and what he was being blamed for may be framed, in addition to Cattelino's double bind, within Deborah Poole's definition of the "slip- page between threat and guarantee," a place where the "legitimacy of state rule" comes into contact with "arbitrary forms of state power."[50] This tension constitutes settler colonialism. Mamdani's interpretation characterizes liberal-nationalist colonialism as the aggrandizing of the nation at the expense of the "uncivilized." Mamdani's account of polit- ical subjectification explains a process by which colonized populations appropriate aspirations toward the nation-state in an attempt to undo their status of "permanent minority." Yet in aspiring to the nation-state, colonized populations are incapable of undoing the state's constitu- tive formation: the fact that its mission is to "valorize only members of the nation,"[51] meaning the settler nation. State protection of the Otomí Community loomed over the INPI constantly in the figure of state offi- cials attending public discussion forums and those who "tolerated" the occupation of a federal building. But their rejection was also present in the shape of officials who would not look them in the eye, labeled them as migrants, and asked why they could not just cooperate, after the Otomí had faced previous evictions by these same officials.

In another event in November 2020, Otomí Community member Margarita Margarito, addressing INPI director Adelfo Regino, explained that the purpose of the INPI takeover was not only to denounce evictions but to demand a set of rights the state denies them. Affectively, Margarito best represented the quest for sovereignty as materialized in the (un)fulfilment of concrete rights. Referring to an eviction she had suffered in Roma 18, Margarito explained that after facing this, she had received no help from federal or local authorities. After she lost the merchandise she sold on the streets, and her place of residence, there was no assistance (monetary or of any other sort) that could help her get back on her feet. When after the violent eviction she took her infant son to a public hospital, he was also not received. In Margarito's terms, government officials claiming that they were "worried about the Otomí" were lying and were only interested in securing their access to the main building of the INPI.[52]

In another fragment from the same event, Otomí Community leader Isabel Valencia summarized the links between the occupants' demands and a broader Indigenous, anti-capitalist, and environmen- talist movement with claims in both Mexico City and the country as a whole. In Valencia's words, she was denouncing not only govern- ment injustices the Otomí have faced in Mexico City, but the deploy- ment of megaprojects across Indigenous territories in the country as a whole. "We will not let you go on dispossessing us here in the city," Valencia claimed. But she also stated that she was not just referring to the Otomí. "You say that we are one people [*un pueblo*]. No. Here we are many peoples [*muchos pueblos*], who today have had enough."[53] The most obvious element in the speeches cited above was criticism of what was seen as a blatantly racist state. However, the speeches also hinted at a more complex relation with the state, Morena, and the Mexico City authorities. As in my encounter with Laura at the Morena rally, attachments to the nation-state and reading Morena as left-wing were leading some to say that AMLO could do something to save them. This was a form of negotiating with the state that hinged on rejecting it, yet constitutively asked it to materially provide rights. Negotiating sovereignty entailed "refusing" at the same time that it entailed accommodating what was seen as a government by the left.

In these fragments, I would like to underscore the fact that Indigenous autonomy in both Morena and San Juan was always linked to the Mexico City Otomí Community's experiences of state-spon- sored discrimination and harassment. The Otomí's expressed quest for political sovereignty, which would link to granting their towns budgetary autonomy, was physically linked to the violence they had experienced in evictions operated by Mexico City's government, and to the economic deprivation they faced as both street vendors and squatters. By occupying a federal building housing the Department in charge of managing Indigenous populations across Mexico, and collaborating with the grassroots National Indigenous Congress, the Otomí were also claiming their experience as an Indigenous popula- tion was linked to the experience of other Indigenous groups across the country—mainly of those facing state extractivism in the shape of the construction of megaprojects in their territories. Within this set of claims, however, what emerged analytically was the double bind of Indigenous sovereignty that both rested on the Otomí's refusal of state practices and, at the same time, hinged on their desire to be recog- nized and provided for by the state. The center of my claim here is not just that the Otomí are demanding something from the state, but that by requesting their budgetary autonomy, and the sovereignty of their bodies and territories, they also demanded that the state give them something it owed them.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has examined ethnographic encounters at an intercultural organization in the Otomí town of San Miguel, at the takeover of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples by the Mexico City Otomí Community, and at a rally by the National Regeneration Movement in the colonial city of Manantial. In traveling between these different sites, I have put pressure on where the quest for Indigenous sover- eignty becomes entangled with narratives as varied as interculturality, solidarity economics, Zapatismo, autonomy, and the left-wing prom- ises of the National Regeneration Movement. My interest in using sovereignty as an analytical lens lies in hinting at the basic thing the Otomí were asking for. Although it took the form of an Indigenous autonomy trial in San Miguel, the occupation of a federal building in Mexico City, and grassroots mobilization in the town of San Juan, these sites of political organizing came together in a quest for Indigenous recognition within the Mexican settler state. I have chosen to call this sovereignty to bring these moments in conversation with North American theory on Indigenous studies and with an anthropological definition of sovereignty as it is deployed bodily and affectively.

Following Thomas and Masco[54] and Cattelino and Simpson,[55] I suggest an understanding of sovereignty centering on an Indigenous- studies definition of nested sovereignty that exists in actual polities within settler states, as well as in affective expressions in populations demanding political recognition. Even if it is not legally recognized in Mexico under this name (taking instead the forms of autonomy and self-determination), Indigenous sovereignty is a useful concept for understanding both settler oppression and

the search for recog- nition by Indigenous groups across Mexico. In an early polemic on the concept of sovereignty, Audra Simpson suggested that shedding light on Indigenous sovereignty is a way of rejecting the Foucauldian biopolitical as the center of social and political analysis. It is not settler states' exercise of power for controlling the population that is of interest in these readings, but rather that which is "embedded within settler systems,"[56] forms of life and of political organization that have survived colonialism that explicitly center Indigeneity in the face of oppression.

Figure 2. A fragment of the INPI façade on Avenue México-Coyoacán that in- cludes the words, "This is where the traitor to Indigenous peoples used to work!", "EZLN," "Housing," and "Samir Lives." Photo by author.

In interpreting sovereignty as an affective deployment of resis- tance (to settler colonialism in particular), it is possible to see plights like the Indigenous autonomy cases in San Miguel and the Otomí Community occupation of the INPI as outright performances of sovereignty. This sovereignty is always negotiated with the state for the sake of acquiring basic material rights. This negotiation is stuck within Cattelino's "double bind,"[57] pulling in both directions, toward refusing the state and toward navigating it. While refusing the state is a constitutive part of Indigenous movements, playing with the state, negotiating with it, and becoming affectively attached to it are simi- larly constitutive components of Indigeneity. In the affective rendering of the Otomí, Indigenous sovereignty pulls both ways: toward anti- statism and toward profound statist attachments, mobilized in Mexico by what portrayed itself as a leftist government.

## NOTES

1. This text has benefitted from discussions with Catherine Fennell, Brodwyn Fischer, Claudio Lomnitz, Antina von Schnitzler, and Audra Simpson. I would like to acknowl- edge the comments of Elisabeth Anker, Cristina Beltrán, and one anonymous reviewer. Mostly, I owe this work to my interlocutors in the Mexico City Otomí Community, the Emiliano Zapata Popular Revolutionary Union, and the Otomí region of central Mexico. Fieldwork was made possible by funding from St Anne's College and the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford, as well as Mexico's Consejo Nacional de Humanidades, Ciencia y Tecnologia (CONAHCYT). A previous version of this essay was presented at the American Anthropological Association's 2022 conference "Unsettling Landscapes" in Seattle.
2. I am referring in particular to Veronica Crossa, Luchando por un espacio en la ciudad de Mexico. Comerciantes ambulantes y el espacio publico urbano (El Colegio de Mexico, 2018); and Alejandra Leal, "Securing the Street: The Fight against 'Informality' in Mexico City," in Asher Ghertner, Daniel Goldstein, and Hudson McFann (eds.), Futureproof: Security Aesthetics and the Management of Life (Duke University Press, 2020), 245–270.

3. Especially Nikhil Anand, Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructure of Citizenship in Mumbai (Duke University Press, 2017); Catherine Fennell, Last Project Standing: Civics and Sympathy in Post-Welfare Chicago (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Antina von Schnitzler, Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics after Apartheid (Princeton University Press, 2016).
4. See Deborah Thomas and Joseph Masco (eds.), Sovereignty Unhinged: An Illustrated Primer for the Study of Present Intensities, Disavowals, and Temporal Derangements (Duke University Press, 2023).
5. Kevin Bruyneel, The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
6. Jessica Cattelino, "The Double Bind of American Indian Need-Based Sovereignty,"
7. Cultural Anthropology 25 (2010): 235–262.
8. Audra Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States
9. (Duke University Press, 2014).
10. Bruyneel, The Third Space of Sovereignty, 173.
11. Bruyneel, The Third Space of Sovereignty, 174.
12. Cattelino, "The Double Bind…," 236.
13. Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus, 103.
14. The Mexico City Otomí Community have repeatedly complained against the federal and local governments labeling them as "migrants," deploying Indigenous identity as proof that "they" have been "here" for centuries.
15. Lourdes Arizpe, Indígenas en la ciudad de México. El caso de "las Marías" (SEP Setentas, 1975), 79–96.
16. Renamed INPI in 2018, the institution was formerly the National Indigenist Institute (INI) from 1948 to 2003, and then the Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) from 2003 to 2018. For an ethnography of the institution in the late 1990s and early 2000s, see Emiko Saldívar, Prácticas cotidianas del Estado: una etnografía del indigenismo (Universidad Iberoamericana / Plaza y Valdez, 2008).
17. A commission of seven people known as the Escuadrón 421 sailed from Isla Mujeres in the Mexican Caribbean on May 2, 2021, and arrived at the Portuguese port of Vigo forty-seven days later. A second commission known as the Extemporánea, made up of approximately 140 people (including the Otomí Community members), flew from Mexico City to Vienna on September 13, 2021.
18. This work built explicitly on Giorgio Agamben's understanding of sovereignty as the power of exception in Homo Sacer (2008). See J. Cattelino and A. Simpson, "Rethinking Indigeneity: Scholarship at the Intersection of Native American Studies and Anthropology," Annual Review of Anthropology 51 (2022): 366. The sovereignty of the state that these authors depart from is analyzed, for instance, in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Harvard University Press, 2001), and Wendy Brown, Walled States, Waning Sovereignty (Zone Books, 2010).
19. Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus, 10.
20. Cattelino, "The Double Bind…," 237.

21. Simpson, “Sovereignty, Sympathy, and Indigeneity,” in Carole McGranahan and John E. Collins (eds.), Ethnographies of US Empire (Duke University Press, 2018), 72–92.
22. Elizabeth Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism (Duke University Press, 2011), 134 et passim.
23. In analyzing the conceptualization of Indigeneity as it emerged from the morality of non-profit organizations in Mexico, I am thinking through Muehlebach’s work on Catholicism and neoliberalism in Italy, The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy (University of Chicago Press, 2012).
24. See Colectivo Llegó la Hora de los Pueblos and Colectivo de Apoyo al CNI-CIG-EZLN, public letter to Rosario Piedra Ibarra (President of the National Human Rights Commission), November 26, 2021, https://radiozapatista.org/?p=40478.
25. See Luis Aboites, “La salida del neoliberalismo: ¿a cargo de quién?”, La Jornada, November 6, 2021, https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2021/11/06/ politica/la-salida-del-neoliberalismo-a-cargo-de-quien/, and Raúl Benet, “Postneoliberalismo y el Tren Maya,” Aristegui Noticias, April 3, 2019. https:// aristeguinoticias.com/0304/mexico/post-neoliberalismo-y-el-tren-maya-articulo/.
26. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, “Acuerdo por el que se ordena a las dependencias y entidades de la Administración Pública…,” Diario Oficial de la Federación, November 22, 2021.
27. Even if the 1996 San Andrés Accords proposed to establish a new pact between Indigenous groups and the state and listed specific reforms for the state of Chiapas, a second round of negotiations proposing to make Indigenous peoples the subject of collective rights was later not completed. The Vicente Fox government (2000–2006) promised to honor the San Andrés Accords and in 2001 proposed an Indigenous Rights Bill (Ley COCOPA) that was inspired in the 1996 Accords. But because it was not sufficiently rallied in Congress, the resulting constitutional reform was considered a diluted version of the original Zapatista cause After the Zapatista guerrilla rose up in arms on January 1, 1994, it declared war to the government of Mexico and took the municipal offices of seven towns in the southern state of Chiapas. After twelve days of armed conflict, the Mexican government declared a ceasefire on January 12, 1994. While 1994 and 1995 saw mostly land invasions by peasants demanding redistribution and political autonomy, 1996 saw a round of peace negotiations between the EZLN and government officials. See Maria Inclan, The Zapatista Movement and Mexico’s Democratic Transition: Mobilization, Success, and Survival (Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–18.
28. Denise Román, “El espejismo del orden. Etnografía histórica sobre política local en Cherán (1856–2014),” Ph.D. diss. in Social Anthropology (El Colegio de Michoacán, 2014), 316–317.
29. After the Cherán case was successful in the Supreme Court, it became the attribution of local electoral courthouses to determine whether Indigenous localities within their jurisdictions could be declared autonomous. A handful

of cases followed both within Michoacán and in the nearby states of Guanajuato and Querétaro (including the town of San Miguel in 2020).

30. A close reading of Deleuze and Guattari would suggest that my interlocutor was overlooking the authors' critique of contemporary autonomy movements as purely nominal processes that are incapable of breaking with state capitalism (and liberalism). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 470.
31. Cattelino and Simpson, "Rethinking Indigeneity," 366.
32. Joseph Masco and Deborah Thomas, "Introduction. Feeling Unhinged," in D. Thomas and J. Masco (eds.), Sovereignty Unhinged, 4. See also Deborah Thomas, "Sovereignty and Surrendering," Boas Talk at Columbia University, New York, September 28, 2022. This work specifically departs from Carl Schmitt's theoriza- tions of sovereignty as the power of exception and suggests instead that sover- eignty may be found in the forces of resistance. See Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty (MIT Press, 1986).
33. Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," Critical Inquiry 33 (2007): 754–755.
34. Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus, 11–15.
35. Jessica Cattelino, "From Locke to Slots: Money and the Politics of Indigeneity,"
36. Comparative Studies in Society and History 60 (2018): 274–307.
37. In the Mexican context, critical Mixe scholar Yásnaya Aguilar has asked that Zapatismo be interpreted in the sense of building an "Us Without Mexico," under- standing Indigenous peoples as existing from without the Mexican nation-state, not necessarily within it. This is a reframing of the old Zapatista motto "Never Again a Mexico Without Us,". Yásnaya Aguilar, "Nosotros sin México: naciones indígenas y autonomía," Nexos (May 2018), https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/nosotros-sin-mexi- co-naciones-indigenas-y-autonomia.
38. Elizabeth Povinelli, The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism (Duke University Press, 2001), 153–185.
39. Karen Engle, The Elusive Promise of Indigenous Development: Rights, Culture, Strategy
40. (Duke University Press, 2010), 10.
41. While San Miguel and San Juan were not affected by COVID-19 restrictions over the summer of 2020, my visits to Mexico City and to the city of Manantial entailed quarantining and wearing gear to protect both interlocutors and me.
42. Víctor Usón, "Un símbolo de la resistencia republicana, okupado," El País, January 20, 2016, https://elpais.com/cultura/2016/01/20/actualidad/1453324427_644000. html?event_log=oklogin.
43. See David Harvey, "The Right to the City," New Left Review 53 (2008), https:// newleftreview.org/ issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city.
44. Desinformémonos, Samir, Mexico City, independent, 22 minutes, 2020. The film can

45. be found online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7vs84ktyj4.
46. For an analysis of state-inflicted oppression towards Indigenous people in this time period, see Natividad Gutiérrez Chong, El indigenismo del PAN y el bicentenario del Estado mexicano (Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2015).
47. She and two other women were imprisoned for three years, and only released when international human rights organizations became involved in their defense.
48. Simpson, Mohawk Interruptus, 102.
49. Erin Pineda, Seeing like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement
50. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 198.
51. J. Cattelino, "The Double Bind…," art. cit., 237.
52. Here I am thinking through Nitzan Shoshan's understandings of state attachments in The Management of Hate: Nation, Affect, and the Management of Right-Wing Extremism in Germany (Princeton University Press, 2016).
53. Zósimo Camacho, "En puerta, reforma para asignar presupuesto federal directo a los pueblos indígenas," Contralínea, July 26, 2020. https://contralinea.com.mx/ en-puerta-reforma-para-asignar-presupuesto-federal-directo-a-los-pueblos-indi- genas/
54. The reform was presented at the Los Pinos cultural center in August 2023. INPI, "Reforma indigena y afromexicana, un paso fundamental para el reconocimiento de sus derechos," August 10, 2023, https://www.gob.mx/inpi/es/articulos/ reforma-indigena-y-afromexicana-un-paso-fundamental-para-el-reconocimien- to-de-sus-derechos?idiom=es.
55. Osbelia Quiroz, "Toma del INPI," Radio Regeneración, October 17, 2020, broadcasted via Facebook Live on October 17, 2020. This video and others that I quote from the same media source can be found in the Radio Regeneración archive at https:// www.facebook.com/regeneracionradio/videos/?ref=page internal. Last accessed on August 2, 2023. Quiroz was perhaps referring to the fact that historian Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller had traveled to the Vatican days before to ask Pope Francis to apologize to Mexico for the 1521 Conquest. Although at a later date a represen- tative of the Mexico City government promised the Otomí Community to deliver the land title of one of the buildings where they have been squatting for the past twenty-five years (Roma 18), as a gesture to honor the fifth centennial of the fall of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in 2021, neither President López Obrador nor mayor of Mexico City Claudia Sheinbaum responded publicly to the INPI takeover or to Quiroz's message.
56. Deborah Poole, "Between Threat and Guarantee: Anthropology in the Margins of the Peruvian State," in Veena Das and Deborah Poole (eds.), Anthropology in the Margins of the State (Oxford University Press, 2005), 36.
57. Mahmood Mamdani, Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities (Harvard University Press, 2020), 7.
58. Margarita Margarito, "Mesa de diálogo," Radio Regeneración, broadcasted via Facebook Live on October 27, 2020.

59. Isabel Valencia, “Mesa de diálogo,” Radio Regeneración, broadcasted via Facebook Live on November 3, 2020.
60. D., Thomas and J. Masco, Sovereignty Unhinged…, op. cit., 5.
61. J. Cattelino and A. Simpson, “Rethinking Indigeneity…,” art. cit., 366.
62. Audra Simpson, “Settlement’s Secret,” Cultural Anthropology 26 (2011): 209.
63. J. Cattelino, “The Double Bind…,” 236.