Making Influence Visible: Innovating Ethnography at the Paris Climate Summit

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Abstract

Although Indigenous Peoples make significant contributions to global environmental governance and were prominent actors at the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, COP21, they remain largely invisible in conventional, mainstream, and academic accounts of COP21. In this article, we adopt feminist collaborative event ethnography to draw attention to often marginalized and unrecognized actors and help make visible processes that are often invisible in the study of power and influence at sites of global environmental governance. Specifically, we integrate current approaches to power from international relations and political ecology scholarship to investigate how Indigenous Peoples, critical actors for solving global environmental challenges, access, navigate, and cultivate power at COP21 to shape global environmental governance. Through conceptual and methodological innovations that illuminate how Indigenous Peoples overcome structural and spatial barriers to engagement, this article demonstrates how attention to the politics of representation through pluralistic approaches to power can help expand the repertoire of possibilities for advancing global environmental governance.

 Scholars and policy makers laud the Twenty-First Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) as a “diplomatic triumph” in an era of intractable climate politics, crediting especially nonstate actors, including cities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and

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businesses, for helping to usher in an agreement that adopted science-based targets for climate action (Mahapatra and Ratha 2016, 1; Schellnhuber et al. 2016). A few months following its conclusion, Christiana Figueres, the president of COP21, noted, “I remember the day the Paris Agreement was adopted. I cannot tell you the euphoria in the room. Five thousand people jumping out of their seats, crying, clapping, screaming, yelling, torn between euphoria and still disbelief at what they had just seen” (Figueres 2016). Absent from most accounts of COP21, however, are the anger, frustration, and exhaustion of the more than one thousand Indigenous participants who, also excluded from many negotiations leading up to Paris, were unsuccessful in securing recognition of Indigenous rights in the operational part of the agreement. Also missing is recognition of how Indigenous Peoples, through unrelenting determination, played a key role in securing references to human rights and Indigenous rights in the agreement’s Preamble, making an incremental yet significant advance in their struggles for justice. Thus, despite the prominence of Indigenous Peoples, often visible through their use of ceremonial dress, musical processions, and strategic interventions during the negotiations, but equally as present in press conferences, side events, and other activities that advanced their pursuits of justice, they remain largely invisible in conventional, mainstream, and academic accounts of COP21 (e.g., Dimitrov 2016; Hale 2016).

Empirically investigating the role of overlooked actors is a challenging endeavor for scholars of global environmental politics. Customary ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions developed to analyze actors in global governance can limit how researchers approach power and influence: by focusing initially on state actors, and eventually nonstate actors, researchers largely reinforced narrow ideas of who powerful actors could be (Todd 2016). In a 2014 special issue of this journal, however, innovators of collaborative event ethnography (CEE) introduced the methodology as one way to address the under-theorization of power in global environmental governance (GEG) by forcing attention to overlooked actors and processes by “locating the transitory, dispersed, and often hidden sources of power in contemporary networks of environmental governance” (Corson et al. 2014a, 34; see also Campbell et al. 2014). Much of this work has focused on the effects of hegemonic expressions of diverse forms of power (Corson et al. 2015; Hagerman et al. 2012; Scott et al. 2014). Here we seek to advance their efforts in two ways. First, we focus on Indigenous Peoples to test how CEE can be applied to examine underrepresented or overlooked actors at sites of GEG. Specifically, we integrate theoretical insights from political ecology and international relations to consider the interworkings of less overt forms of power to analyze how Indigenous Peoples influence sites of GEG. As a team-based, ethnographic approach to studying global megaevents, CEE can generate empirical insights into how plural, ambiguous, and often contradictory forms of power emerge to shape GEG (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018; Svarstad et al. 2018). Second, we develop a feminist approach to CEE that can generate empirical insights attentive to
intersectional identities of different actors in GEG, and we focus on how power dynamics within and across CEE teams shape our research. Such work has theoretical and practical significance: by revealing different entanglements and expressions of power through its theoretically informed analytics, we show how CEE is particularly well suited for capturing the processual unfolding of how diverse actors, especially so-called marginalized actors, translate power into influence. In doing so, this work expands the repertoire of possibilities for advancing research toward more just and effective GEG.

**Indigenous Presence and Influence at Sites of Global Environmental Governance**

While Indigenous Peoples are underrepresented in literature, their presence at sites of GEG has steadily expanded. Since the UNFCCC’s establishment, Indigenous Peoples have had formal, although nonvoting, representatives at each summit. In 2008, the International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) formed to coordinate a common Indigenous platform (International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on Climate Change [IIPFCC], n.d.). The first Indigenous Peoples Pavilion (IPP), organized at COP20 in Lima, Peru, provided the only dedicated space for addressing Indigenous contributions, ideas, and issues related to climate change; since then, every COP has had an IPP organized by and for Indigenous Peoples in the noncredentialied, civil society spaces. Despite their exclusion from many negotiations leading up to COP21, 3 percent of credentialed delegates registered in the Indigenous Peoples category. Still significantly less than the 5 percent of the population who identify as Indigenous—and not accounting Indigenous participants who could only access the public spaces of COP21 or Indigenous delegates registered under other categories—this participation signals an important shift in Indigenous representation.

Such changes in representation are not surprising when considering Indigenous contributions to GEG (Berkes 2004; Whyte et al. 2016). Indigenous Peoples’ Lands are strongholds of conservation in the face of extractivist economies and rapid environmental change: the 22 percent of global land area governed by Indigenous Peoples contains 80 percent of remaining biodiversity and 20 percent of forest carbon stocks (Environmental Defense Fund and Woods Hole Research Center 2015; Sobrevila 2008; United Nations 2009; Zanotti 2016). Despite these recognized contributions, most research outside Indigenous studies and anthropology continues to view Indigenous Peoples more as recipients or targets of GEG than as active agents in its production (Simpson 2007). For example, political ecologists have documented how global policies impact the livelihoods of Indigenous communities (West et al. 2006; Zimmerer 2015), sometimes exacerbating poverty, inciting conflict, and displacing entire communities (Agrawal and Redford 2009; Sikor and Câm 2016). Environmental justice scholars find that norms embedded in international regimes can restrict how
communities expect and experience justice (Marion Suiseeya 2017). Many nation-states fail to fully recognize Indigenous Peoples, deny their political and economic rights, and may violently oppress groups that seek to exert their rights (Tauli Corpuz 2016). With some exceptions (e.g., Belfer et al. 2019; Marion Suiseeya 2014; Reimerson 2013; Wallbott 2014), most scholarly accounts rarely discuss Indigenous presence in international environmental negotiations; when they do, it is generally in the context of protest and performance, or as weak and inconsequential actors—and sometimes victims—in international politics (Brugnach et al. 2017; Schroeder 2010). International relations scholarship more broadly is largely silent on the role of Indigenous Peoples, placing them on the periphery of international politics (Lightfoot 2016). Such marginalization emerges, in part, from how scholars conceptualize power and influence.

Power

To examine the significance of Indigenous presence in GEG, we turned to literature that examines how actors express power and influence. Although questions of power are at the heart of scholarly inquiries in international relations and political ecology, most empirical studies underspecify conceptualizations of power (Baldwin 2016; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018; Svarstad et al. 2018). Studies vary their approaches by (1) focusing on the nature of power, that is, its constitution through resources (Cormier 2018), ideas (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Hurd 2008), capabilities (Arts and Van Tatenhove 2004; Betzold 2010), and relations (Peet et al. 2011); (2) identifying the types, manifestations, or avenues of power, that is, instrumental (Betsill and Corell 2008), dispositional (van der Molen 2018), structural (Marquardt 2017), discursive (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2016), relational power (Barnett and Duvall 2005); (3) locating power, that is, in material, social, and political realms of action (Corell 1999; Hughes and Vadrot, this issue) or in constitutive processes (Ahlborg and Nightingale 2018); and (4) elaborating the conditions for, instruments of, and actors who hold power, for example, conflict (Baldwin 2016), access (Kuyper et al. 2018), and individuals (Krott et al. 2014), among others (see Figure 1). Most scholars isolate one form or mode of power in their analyses, neglecting the multiple, plural, and sometimes less visible forms that circulate in global governance (Corson et al. 2014b; Gray et al. 2014; Lightfoot 2016; MacDonald and Corson 2012). Additionally, by focusing initially on state actors, and eventually certain types of nonstate actors, scholars establish ideas of who can be powerful, what factors constitute power, and what power and influence look like (Lightfoot 2016; Todd 2016). These efforts have largely revealed how overt and instrumental forms of material power operate, such as wealth, population, territory, and certain types of expertise. Focusing on such forms of power that are relatively inaccessible to marginalized groups renders certain actors insignificant, limiting insights into how power operates (Barnett and Duvall 2005).
Reflecting current scholarship that moves away from overt and hegemonic expressions of power, we approach power as mutual, simultaneous constitutions of agency and structures (see Figure 2). We are thus not looking to isolate any particular form of power to explain its effects but rather consider how power is dynamic, plural, and constitutive of multiple approaches to create spaces for understanding how diverse forms of power emerge, diverge, and change, as well as transform and disrupt other forms of power.

**Influence**

Often conflated with power, influence is similarly undertheorized, but unlike power, its conceptualization has not theoretically expanded. Sometimes influence results from power (e.g., Baldwin 2016), other times power results from
influence (e.g., Arts 2003). Still others define influence as “power without apparent coercion” (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 895). In global environmental politics, influence has emerged as a core area of inquiry (e.g., Jinnah 2014). Betsill and Corell’s (2008) pivotal work on NGO influence expanded empirical approaches to power to include the processual dimensions of goal attainment. Where outcome (“high”) influence changes the substantive outcomes of the negotiations, for example, effects on the final text, processual (“low”) influence emerges though issue framing, agenda setting, or impacting the positions of key states (Betsill and Corell 2008, 11). Critically, this approach privileges instrumental and functionalist perspectives on power, implying that both power and influence must be visible, intentional, and transparent—in other words, overt. Although novel for identifying nonstate influence in global environmental politics, anthropological studies have previously shown that processes can be as critical as outcomes because of how different groups are represented—both by themselves and others—in establishing the scope and conditions for generating outcomes (Hall 1997; Merry 2006).

Our conceptual approach to power opens possibilities for also considering influence beyond its overt and instrumental forms. We conceptualize influence broadly as the linear, nonlinear, or punctuated effects of power on the everyday practices of a given action arena (Witter et al. 2015). Because shaping agendas, framing issues, and impacting the positions of key actors—Betsill and Corell’s indicators of processual influence—are contingent upon the conditions and practices of representation at sites of GEG, we specifically conceptualize influence as the ability of actors to transform representation—the acts of and processes for making something visible—in global governance. These changes in representation include, for example, changes in the groups, interests, and intersectional identities represented in any given space or venue; where and how they are represented; who represents different groups, in what way, and how representatives are selected; what spaces of representation are available or exist; and where new opportunities or footholds for representation are created. This approach opens a key space in which to consider the intersections and temporal dimensions of influence and the politics of representation.
Seeing Presence and Influence through Feminist Collaborative Event Ethnography

Merely shifting our theoretical foundations to approach power and influence is insufficient for understanding Indigenous presence in GEG. Sites like COP21 also pose methodological challenges. While short in duration, ranging from a few days to two weeks, UNFCCC processes include tens of thousands of participants spread across hundreds of concurrent events; understanding even traditional actors is a challenge (Brosius and Campbell 2010). These challenges become more pronounced when studying less prominent actors, as visible outcomes are less likely to reflect their engagement (see also Pickering, this issue).

Several established features of CEE offer an especially powerful way to understand how Indigenous Peoples shape GEG: ethnographic tools capture processual unfolding and influence as we operationalize it; team-based approaches provide depth and coverage for studying “hard to find” and “less visible” actors; and the common analytical framework guides complex theoretical framings to generate standardized collective insights (Corson et al. 2014a, 24–28; MacKay and Levin 2015). The three core analytics—the politics of translation, scale, and performance—identified by CEE innovators facilitate systematic approaches to power and influence (for details, see Campbell et al. 2014). Extending this CEE work on hidden forms of power beyond their disciplining and hegemonic expressions, however, we propose that less overtly powerful actors can leverage these three explicit forms of politics to contest and relocate productions of legitimacy, authority, and legibility.

We further adapt CEE through five interventions: first, we extend the CEE analytics to more explicitly include performativity as a way to consider how agents intersubjectively navigate power and influence within and across GEG events. While other CEE pieces note performance and performativity, they tend to mention performativity in passing or treat the concepts as interchangeable. For example, MacDonald and Corson (2012, 163) “emphasize the performativity of a conference site” to develop performance as a critical analytic for examining how idealized notions of nature, biodiversity, and conservation emerge and ultimately perform and script the production of GEG. In these works, performance examines the dramaturgical elements of sites, including how sites are managed, by whom, and with what scripts, to demonstrate how certain ideas become institutional expressions of particular visions (MacDonald and Corson 2012). Performativity, however, warrants its own analytical category because, in contrast to performance, it “acknowledge[s] the contingent, fluid, ambiguous, and ongoing processes of representation of subject/self-formation” (Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2019). Elaborating the theoretical distinctions between performance and performativity is crucial for illuminating the agency of actants in producing GEG.

Second, we propose a feminist approach to CEE that considers all actors and actants—as well as their multiple identities—significant for study (Zanotti
and Marion Suiseeya 2019). By directing heightened attention to the experiences and perceptions of intersectional identities, power, and privilege throughout the ethnographic process (Choo and Ferree 2010; Degnen and Tyler 2017; Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; Klinsky 2018), we can account for the influence of often marginalized and unrecognized actors in GEG.

Third, we consider the landscape of the “field” established in CEE beyond the real-time events at Le Bourget (the location of COP21) to include the digital life of the conference as an equally important site (e.g., Pink et al. 2016). Ubiquitous in representational politics, digital sites are spaces in which “cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries … are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated” (Coleman 2010, 488). Working with undergraduate students as COP21 was unfolding, we conducted twenty-eight digital ethnographies to examine its digital life and explore how different actors virtually engaged COP21. This included discovering how organizations without a significant physical presence cultivated online presence around COP21. The World Wildlife Fund, for example, largely unseen outside of its Green Zone booth, generated significant online engagement through the launch of its new climate change platform. Organizations such as Kebetkache, a women’s environmental and development organization from Nigeria, used digital spaces to engage in COP21 because representatives could not attend. Thus understanding the digital life of COP21, through the visibility of social media and other web-based interfaces, was critical for addressing our questions about differentiated access and influence.

Fourth, while CEE teams typically use photographs as supplementary documentation to field notes, for example, as comprehensive visual records of slides, event spaces, and event participants (Bauer and Gaskell 2000), we consider photos and other visual artifacts as actants and explicit reflections and distinct forms representations of the “production of knowledge and ways of knowing,” independent of other activities taking place in a particular space (Pink 2006, 35). Visual ethnography thus illuminates additional sites, modes, and plural forms of representation not easily described in field notes, and thus critical for understanding the fast-paced context and politics of COP21. In one example, our team did not document the range of peoples, the way the media stood in the center of the protest, and the expressions of laughter and joy of the protest leaders captured in our images. Instead, their field notes focused on police presence and gave the impression that the media were primarily observers, rendering the protest an explicit act of resistance rather than an act of solidarity. Photos and videos thus generate an understanding of Indigenous presence by highlighting the subtle/explicit interactions between/within audience and speakers and leaders at events.

Our final adaptation relates to our work with digital and visual ethnography. To engage these methods and generate insights across physical, digital, and visual sites, we extended our field teams to engage researchers at our home institutions. These efforts are not simply hiring research assistants to perform data
entry and organization. Rather, we onboard these researchers to our team in the same way as field team members, thus creating resonance in analytics, research goals, and focus within and across the teams. Our digital ethnographies, for example, made it possible to identify and trace the digital expansion and contraction of spaces for representation at COP21. In another case, we extended our team to include a class of ten students who designed and implemented a visual analysis protocol using raw field image data to examine the evolution of the visual politics of representation in GEG across events (Marion Suiseeyea et al. 2018b). We ultimately coded and analyzed more than twelve hundred of our ten thousand plus images from COP21. This dynamic team composition, with its expansion and contraction, facilitates both immersed and more distant analyses to help discover parallel and connected phenomena, especially as power articulates across time and space.

On-site in Paris, our team of seven non-Indigenous researchers ultimately collected nearly two terabytes of data: ten thousand photos; hundreds of hours of audio files; thousands of pages of field notes and archives of digital artifacts, analytical reflections, and transcriptions; twenty-five kilograms of materials; and many hours of amateur films from 176 sessions and meetings. Through collaborative and iterative analyses of these data, our team developed a more plural and robust understanding of the significance of Indigenous presence at sites of GEG. We present some of these findings below.

**Changing Indigenous Representation at COP21**

Throughout COP21, the UNFCCC Secretariat and COP21 president touted their efforts to include Indigenous Peoples. The layout, rules, and regulations of the Le Bourget site, however, created multiple and significant structural, spatial, and institutional constraints to access and engagement (see Figure 3). Here each day, our team took note of when, where, in what forms, under what conditions, and with what effects we witnessed Indigenous presence. In what follows, we demonstrate how Indigenous Peoples influenced COP21 by changing the practices of Indigenous representation in two critical ways. By engaging the politics of translation, scale, performance, and performativity to create Indigenous spaces and sustained Indigenous voices, Indigenous Peoples heightened their legibility. Additionally, by shifting representation away from the modes and practices established by UNFCCC parties toward representation advanced by Indigenous Peoples, which allowed for multiple, diverse representations of intersectional identities, values, and interests to emerge, Indigenous Peoples contested and relocated the legitimacy and authority of conventional representatives.

1. Our interdisciplinary team included two faculty, three graduate students, and two undergraduate students.
Creating Indigenous Spaces

International negotiations are political events not only in the practices, processes, and substance of the meetings but also in the construction and operation of the spaces in which they take place (Lefebvre 1991). Spaces construct relational and representational flows in which intersectional identities, values, and interests gain and lose traction and thus are critical elements for examining power and influence. The construction and operation of Le Bourget, with its separated and differentiated zones for credentialed delegates and the public; security procedures; and availability of facilities and services, including workspace, food, networking areas, functioning internet, language accessibility, and restrooms, created inclusive and exclusive spaces that shaped engagement and access to various locations or sources of power at COP21. For example, in the early days of COP21, the lines to enter the Green Zone were often so long that panels were delayed by an hour waiting for a speaker to clear security. While participants in the Blue Zone had plentiful food service options and well-lit bathrooms, Green Zone participants sometimes waited in hour-long lines only to arrive at the counter and learn the food had run out. The pitch-dark, outhouse-like toilet stalls had no lights and often had multiple units out of order.

Figure 3
Map of the Le Bourget site of COP21. The “Blue Zone” is the area depicted with a thin line around it (Halls 1–6).
Source: UNFCCC Secretariat.
The difficulty of traveling between the two zones, the truncation of presentations by individuals navigating between zones, and the differentiated time burdens associated with pursuing engagement in the different zones effectively limited movement, imposed structural and spatial constraints on the constitution of audience, created an option of isolation for decision makers, and impacted how certain actors cultivated their power. Viewed through the lens of material resources and structural forms of power, these constraints suggest the Blue Zone constitutes the halls of power in which those actors with greater access and assets can leverage their position in the uneven terrain of the governance landscape. The Blue Zone is where decisions are recorded and where actors with material resources, including military, financial, and economic assets, primarily circulated and in which well-resourced actors relative to the structure are able to leverage “control power” to secure particular outcomes (Seybert and Katzenstein 2018). Actors with differentiated access and assets, including Indigenous Peoples, may rely more on leveraging “protean power,” referring to plural forms of power that emerge, often unconsciously, through the use of capabilities, such as creativity and agility, as innovative and improvisational responses to dynamic conditions of uncertainty to create multiple spaces for representation (Seybert and Katzenstein 2018, 4).

During our two weeks at COP21, we noted that Indigenous Peoples were as likely to be at the negotiating table as they were to participate in panel discussions, deliver press conferences, organize side events, and observe proceedings. At times, Indigenous Peoples were highly visible: from elders to youth leaders, different groups represented their communities through musical processions crossing between the Blue and Green Zones at Le Bourget. Indigenous leaders from Pacific Island nation-states such as Fiji and Samoa navigated between the zones, acting both as nation-state party delegates and as members of the Indigenous caucus, joining in strategy meetings or culturally significant events in the IPP. At other times, Indigenous presence seemed marginal and not always highly visible. Unless specifically looking for or tracking Indigenous engagement, as our team was, sometimes the only place in the Blue Zone COP21 attendees might see or take note of Indigenous Peoples would be during approved protests in the open-air corridor between the NGO and media halls adjacent to the nation-state negotiation area, or by attending panels or press release areas in Halls 4 and 5 (see Figure 3). With some exceptions, like Peru, Germany, and Indonesia, which hosted occasional events that focused on issues related to Indigenous rights, Indigenous Peoples were not represented in country pavilions, located in Halls 2 and 3, the spaces most proximate to the negotiations. Indigenous Peoples’ designated workspace in the Blue Zone was a small room adjacent to Hall 4, alongside other civil society groups. It was a vibrant space of activity, with Indigenous Peoples frequently coming and going. The larger, early-morning Indigenous caucuses utilized various side event spaces to accommodate the growing group of delegates and allies pursuing an Indigenous agenda at COP21.

In contrast to their dispersed presence in the Blue Zone, Indigenous presence in the Green Zone was concentrated and constantly humming in the IPP,
which included a roundhouse for workshop-type presentations; a longhouse for rotating, interactive media exhibits; and a 125-person auditorium for formal presentations and debates (see Figures 4a–4g). Here passionate presentations, debates, music, performances, and food introduced diverse peoples and cultures from across the globe. Similar to a “country” pavilion lacking in the Blue Zone, the IPP shaped a different kind of COP21 experience while also offering features readily available to Blue Zone participants, for example, food and spaces for rest. Often, groups of people would cluster into circles on the floor adjacent to the pavilion to continue conversations, cultivate new relationships, take naps, or sing together. Some panels included high-level nation-state delegates, including Mary Robinson (former prime minister of Ireland and UN special envoy on climate change) and François Hollande (president of France); the majority of IPP events, however, served as a platform for Indigenous—rather than nation-state—representation. The space was never empty, and on most evenings, security officers had to nudge participants out when the site closed. Our team was present at all IPP events.

Beyond the spaces utilized for physical representation, Indigenous Peoples were represented through diverse visual and material artefacts—some which they controlled, and some of which had less clear authorization or legitimacy. For example, while the media, nation-states, and NGOs circulated images of Indigenous Peoples and their communities at COP21, there was little systematic information provided on the source, meaning, and consent for their creation and distribution. Dominant conservation portrayals of “nature” often separated sacred and natural spaces from the communities protecting these lands. Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado’s series Genesis in subway tunnels across Paris, for example, emphasized the importance of forests for climate governance while also veiling the contributions of Indigenous Peoples in co-producing these landscapes. To claim recognition, expand their presence inside and outside Le Bourget, develop connections, cultivate new networks, and push back against notions of Indigenous Peoples as one homogenous group, Indigenous Peoples integrated Indigenous artwork, handicrafts, films, and other materials to create and control visual spaces. We saw these expressive forms of representation simultaneously embed the politics of translation, scale, performance, and performativity to articulate and integrate diverse Indigenous identities, values, and interests with the unfolding of COP21. In the IPP’s longhouse, for example, the Asia Indigenous Peoples’ Pact curated digitally animated stories to share Indigenous experiences with climate governance from communities across Asia. In central Paris on December 6, Indigenous groups paddled symbolic canoes and transformed the river into an Indigenous space of solidarity. Paddle to Paris (#paddletoparis) engaged 3.7 million users on Twitter, and twenty thousand users liked and shared the video (Purpose, n.d.). Such Indigenous-controlled spaces were important

2. Notably, however, some high-level representatives who participated in events at the IPP, including Anote Tong, president of Kiribati, and Enele Sopoaga, prime minister of Tuvalu, identified both as indigenous and nation-state representatives.
Figure 4
Different Indigenous Peoples’ Spaces at COP21

4a: Sign directing delegates in the Blue Zone
4b: Approved Protest with Indigenous Peoples’ Representation in the Blue Zone
4c: Blue Zone Exhibit Room
4d: Event held in the roundhouse at the Indigenous Peoples’ Pavilion in the Green Zone
4e: Display in the longhouse at the Indigenous Peoples’ Pavilion in the Green Zone
4f: Event in the auditorium at the Indigenous Peoples’ Pavilion in the Green Zone

Source: Presence to Influence COP21 Team.
arenas for leveraging plural forms of agential, structural, and relational power to strengthen social relations and networks, share ideas and beliefs, and identify new modes of collaboration and governance to contest unsanctioned representations of Indigenous Peoples. By creating and cultivating these spaces, Indigenous Peoples expanded and diversified Indigenous representation at COP21. Through such efforts, Indigenous Peoples’ presence thus touched nearly every corner of COP21.

Sustaining Indigenous Voices

While the media often force attention to Indigenous Peoples primarily through visual cues, such as Inuit women wearing sealskin Anoraks and Tongan men carrying ukuleles, Indigenous representation is not limited to such descriptive and symbolic forms. Instead, Indigenous Peoples bring their expertise directly to multiple spaces to cultivate the continuous, sustained Indigenous voices necessary for deepening representation to advance Indigenous ideas, worldviews, and interests. For example, although the IPP served as a central node to interface with and influence proceedings in the Blue Zone, it was only one node in a broader network created to sustain Indigenous voices across COP21. Indigenous Peoples in the Blue Zone had limited control over the conditions under which they could represent themselves, including credential requirements for entry and control over physical spaces. At the same time, when inside the Blue Zone, Indigenous Peoples—due largely to proximity—had much greater access to nation-state decision makers. Here they held press conferences, participated in side events, engaged in officially permitted protests, and cultivated relationships with key nation-state delegations. By navigating the structural and physical manifestations of a politics of translation stacked against their engagement at COP21, Indigenous Peoples again cultivated protean forms of power to alter their representation.

Friday, December 4, the fifth day of COP21, marked a dramatic turn of events. It was an incredibly busy day as delegates worked to compile their negotiated text for the ministers and heads of state the following week to negotiate and finalize. We attended nineteen distinct events across the Blue and Green Zones, including a full day of the two-day International Rights of Nature Tribunal, an off-site event organized by citizens to draw attention to the destruction of the Earth.3 December 4 was also the first day that a large protest took place inside the Blue Zone. The terrorist attacks in Paris just weeks before COP21 had significantly restricted freedom of assembly in France. The COP21 Secretariat granted limited permission for protests requested at least two days in advance, threatening to revoke the credentials of delegates found in violation of any rules. As such, the protest taking place inside the Blue Zone was significant—it was the first (and one of the only) sanctioned protests inside Le Bourget.

Our team members in the Blue Zone fully experienced this protest—sensing the power, emotion, and momentum rising through this act of solidarity. Indigenous Peoples from across the globe spoke about the importance of including Indigenous rights in Article 2—the article outlining the purpose of the Paris Agreement; delegates from nation-states joined in. As an Indigenous youth leader from the United States led the crowd in song, other leaders scripted the politics of the protest, lining up speakers and crafting soundbites on how the Indigenous caucus should align. Concurrently in the Green Zone, the energy in the IPP and Indigenous engagement strategies were also rapidly transforming. For example, individuals who could not be physically present appeared through virtual and visual channels. Four Indigenous-led social media campaigns, including #paddletoparis, #landrightsnow, #ifnotusthenwho, and #indigenousCOP21, generated millions of views, retweets, and likes by people on- and off-site during COP21. They expressed solidarity; communicated across the zones; raised the profile of particular groups, issues, and values; and documented publicly made commitments, particularly around the bracketing, unbracketing, and removal of Indigenous rights from the draft agreement.

One key moment that illustrates how Indigenous representatives transcended zones at COP21 emerged when a representative from the Norwegian government addressed the IPP. Although the Norwegian government had provided financial support for the IPP, as well as funding for fifty Indigenous delegates, Norway was not a vocal advocate in the Blue Zone. In his brief, unscheduled speech on December 4, after Indigenous rights had been stripped from Article 2bis, the representative noted that Norway would continue to fight for Indigenous rights. At that moment, an Indigenous leader sitting next to author Marion Suiseeya said, “Do you tweet? Tweet that!” This moment points to the digital, in-between spaces of conferences Indigenous Peoples engage when encountering spatial injustices embedded within the built environment of the conference (Marion Suiseeya et al. 2018a). By enlisting and documenting support that could be taken up in a variety of other arenas, Indigenous Peoples leveraged forms of protean power to both confront the significant structural and spatial constraints of the spaces of COP21 and shift where, how, and what constitutes Indigenous representation. Expanding the social and political spaces for Indigenous representation demonstrates Indigenous Peoples’ influence in shaping GEG: despite Norway’s abandonment of Indigenous rights, Indigenous Peoples changed the practices of representation by leveraging a politics of translation and performativity to create Indigenous spaces and sustain Indigenous voices. These efforts resulted in deeper representation by Indigenous representatives but also in the cultivation of nation-state champions for Indigenous rights who, although largely unrepresented in the IPP, intensely worked the Blue Zone to help usher in Indigenous rights in the Paris Agreement.

Influence as Goal Attainment

Our research set out to deepen understandings of influence in GEG beyond measures of goal attainment. Our ethnographic attention to Indigenous presence at COP21, however, also made visible one exceptional example of goal attainment, demonstrating how Indigenous Peoples influenced the outcomes of COP21. As briefly alluded to in the introduction of this article, the Paris Agreement’s Preamble recognizes Indigenous rights:

Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity. (United Nations 2015, emphasis added)

Some researchers puzzle over this inclusion of human rights and Indigenous rights in the Preamble, noting they were not a priority for any party (Mayer 2016). At the same time, the significance of these references is often dismissed because they are not in the operational (binding) part of the treaty, despite their importance as a reflection of the continuing global shift toward Indigenous rights.

Prior to COP21, members of the IIPFCC negotiated a common platform around which Indigenous groups could coalesce. This included adding specific language on Indigenous rights in fifteen different parts of the draft agreement, including Article 2 (the operational part of the agreement), and retaining the five references to Indigenous rights already included in the draft agreement (IIPFCC 2015). As the negotiations in the Blue Zone progressed, Indigenous representatives in the IPP continuously modified their strategy to respond to ongoing changes in the negotiated text. By December 4, 2015, the fifth day of the negotiations, the window of opportunity to secure any recognition of Indigenous rights in the Paris Agreement was rapidly diminishing. One party moved to bracket the “s” on “Indigenous Peoples,” signaling a significant retreat from global commitments to differentiated and collective rights of Indigenous Peoples embodied in the 2008 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (for an extended discussion of this, see Marion Suiseeya et al. 2018a). When it seemed that all rights language in the agreement was in jeopardy, the Indigenous caucus began focusing their efforts on Article 2, more intensely engaging their allies, including groups advocating for gender and labor justice, and leveraging the spaces and channels they had cultivated for sustained representation in the negotiations. Collectively, these alliances emphasized the critical importance of differentiating rights over adopting more generic “human rights” language (Marion Suiseeya et al. 2018a). Each subsequent day of negotiations was turbulent and characterized by uncertainty about the future of Indigenous rights in the Paris Agreement. On the eve of the anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, signed in
Paris in 1948, in the final hours of negotiations, references to differentiated rights were included in the Preamble. There are multiple ways to read and approach this outcome. While it reflects a significant gain for Indigenous Peoples, it was made possible only through the changes to representation advanced by Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, these changes have produced longer-term effects evidenced in subsequent COPs, such as the development of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform designed to deepen Indigenous engagement in UNFCCC processes. To consider such changes in representation only significant alongside measures of goal attainment threatens to perpetuate the received wisdom that Indigenous presence at COP21 is at best symbolic and at worst constitutes exploitation by powerful actors.

Conclusions

The work presented in this article expanded our conceptual and methodological tool kits for understanding power and influence in international agreement-making processes. In casting a wider analytical gaze on sites like COP21 through our focus on the role of Indigenous Peoples in agreement-making processes, our research “recognize[es] the workings of multiple concepts [of power]” and creates possibilities for understanding diverse forms of power and influence (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 69). While the inclusion of human rights and Indigenous rights in the Preamble of the Paris Agreement, for example, is one measure of Indigenous Peoples’ influence at COP21, this is only one of the findings made possible through CEE. We also demonstrate that, through their ability to leverage the politics of translation, scale, performance, and performativity, Indigenous Peoples contested and relocated productions of legitimacy, authority, and legibility to change their representations within and across COP21. For example, by extending the notion of the “field” to include digital landscapes, we attended to particular features of power that emerge despite lack of access: diverse groups actively and virtually engaged COP21 to expand and contract spheres of influence by introducing or amplifying voices, ideas, and identities, which can be physically distant or already active within case sites (Hjorth et al. 2017).

Through our adaptations of CEE, our research showed how multiple types of Indigenous actors leveraged plural, less visible strategies within multiple events to shape their representation in GEG. We highlight how Indigenous representatives created physical, visual, and digital spaces to sustain their voices as they moved in and through the Blue and Green Zones. Where many scholars of international relations assume that only credentialed spaces are arenas of high influence because of the ways in which power (through presence of decision makers) circulates in these spaces, our research demonstrates how public, civil society spaces facilitate the ability of Indigenous influence to transcend compartmentalized zones. Thus, while the spatial organization of sites like COP21 seem to suggest otherwise, our research demonstrates how the physical
structures of negotiations do not always map to forms of influence. Instead, by asking questions not only about who is at the table but also about how that table is shaped—fundamental questions about representation—our approach merges more recent conceptualizations of power to show how changes in representation are part of the influencing practices of Indigenous Peoples. The shifts toward deeper and broader representation is as important an indicator of influence as immediate attainment of procedural or substantive goals.

Ultimately, collaborative work that deeply engages multiple disciplines is critical for overcoming the marginalizing forces produced through certain types of research. Feminist CEE is one approach for advancing understandings of how the processes behind global governance shape its potential to be “good” global governance. Asking questions about how actors cultivate and translate their power into influence once inside international environmental policy arenas can expand our collective imagination for advancing more effective, inclusive, and just global governance.

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