**EUROPEAN REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES**
**REVISTA EUROPEA DE ESTUDIOS LATINOAMERICANOS Y DEL CARIBE**

No. 120 (2025): July-December, pp. 75-86
www.erlacs.org

Special Issue:
Understanding Latin America and the Caribbean:
Current and Upcoming Developments

Exploration | Exploración

# Urban Indigenous territoriality and the politics of climate urbanism in Latin America

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples in Latin America are increasingly urban, yet state imaginaries and scholarly frameworks continue to locate indigeneity in rural spaces. This rural/urban binary is sustained by a model of neoliberal multiculturalism that celebrates cultural difference while denying Indigenous territorial agency in the city. This article challenges these assumptions by arguing that Latin American cities are emerging as key arenas in which Indigenous territoriality is being reconfigured, governed, and defended. Drawing on urban socio-political ecology, it conceptualises Indigenous urbanisation as a reconfiguration of ancestral territorial life rather than its erosion. Through an analysis of Mapuche organisations in Santiago de Chile, among other cases, the article examines how Indigenous collectives enact territorial claims through environmental stewardship, spiritual practice, and political mobilisation. It situates these practices within uneven urban geographies of climate change, showing how Indigenous ontologies of care and reciprocity underpin resilient socio-ecological governance. The exploration proposes Indigenous climate urbanism as a praxis that contests colonial spatial orders while advancing alternative urban futures grounded in ecological collective authority. Recognising Indigenous urban territoriality as legitimate, structural, and transformative is essential for building climate-just and decolonial cities in Latin America. *Keywords*: Decolonial urbanism, indigenous climate urbanism, indigenous territoriality, Latin American cities, urban governance.

Resumen: Territorialidad urbana indígena y la política de urbanismo climático en Latinoamérica

Los pueblos indígenas en América Latina son cada vez más urbanos, pero los imaginarios estatales y los marcos académicos siguen situando la indigeneidad en los espacios rurales.

DOI: http://doi.org/10.32992/erlacs.11459 

WWW.ERLACS.ORG is published by CEDLA – Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation / Centro de Estudios y Documentación Latinoamericanos, Amsterdam; www.cedla.uva.nl; ISSN 0924-0608, eISSN 1879-4750.

Esta dicotomía rural/urbana está sustentada por un modelo de multiculturalismo neoliberal que celebra la diferencia cultural al tiempo que niega la agencia territorial indígena en la ciudad. Este artículo cuestiona estas suposiciones al argumentar que las ciudades latinoamericanas están emergiendo como escenarios clave en los que se está reconfigurando, gobernando y defendiendo la territorialidad indígena. A partir de la ecología sociopolítica urbana, se conceptualiza la urbanización indígena como una reconfiguración de la vida territorial ancestral más que como su erosión. A través de un análisis de las organizaciones mapuches en Santiago de Chile, entre otros casos, el artículo examina cómo los colectivos indígenas hacen valer sus reivindicaciones territoriales mediante la gestión medioambiental, la práctica espiritual y la movilización política. A su vez, sitúa estas prácticas en las geografías urbanas desiguales del cambio climático y muestra cómo las ontologías indígenas del cuidado y la reciprocidad sustentan una gobernanza socioecológica resiliente. La exploración propone el urbanismo climático indígena como una praxis que cuestiona los órdenes espaciales coloniales al tiempo que promueve futuros urbanos alternativos basados en la autoridad colectiva ecológica. Reconocer la territorialidad urbana indígena como legítima, estructural y transformadora es esencial para construir ciudades climáticamente justas y descolonizadas en América Latina. *Palabras clave*: Urbanismo decolonial, urbanismo climático indígena, territorialidad indígena, ciudades latinoamericanas, gobernanza urbana.

## Introduction: The urban turn in Indigenous studies

Latin America is among the most urbanised regions in the Global South, with over 80 per cent of its population living in cities (United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, 2024). Indigenous peoples are not peripheral to this reality, as more than half now reside in urban areas. Yet the dominant imaginary of indigeneity remains tied to rural landscapes, forests, or highlands as spaces of ancestral authenticity (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). Cities, by contrast, have been historically conceptualised as mestizo, modern, and therefore implicitly non-Indigenous spaces (Torino, 2024). The persistence of this epistemological divide is not simply an analytical oversight. It is, as Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) argues, the outcome of a long (post)colonial project that naturalised a geography of difference. This rural/urban binary enables a multicultural politics of recognition without redistribution: the state may celebrate Indigenous culture symbolically while denying Indigenous political legitimacy and territorial authority in cities. By situating indigeneity exclusively within rural landscapes, state institutions maintain an appearance of inclusion while withholding control over urban governance, development, and land.

This rural imaginary performs a double erasure; it displaces Indigenous peoples from the city while denying that cities themselves are Indigenous places. Urban property regimes, as Porter (2016) shows, not only fragment space through systems that value private ownership, titles, and zoning, but also actively exclude Indigenous presence. Such logic reproduces the city as a racialised landscape in which Indigenous relations to place are rendered illegible. Neoliberal multicultural reforms have acknowledged certain cultural rights, but largely confined collective territorial rights to "ancestral" rural spaces (Brablec, 2023; Hale, 2002). In this context, Indigenous life in cities is tolerated only in

symbolic or folkloric forms, divorced from political claims to land, environment, and governance. It is precisely this contradiction that Indigenous urban actors are now confronting. Their growing presence in cities unsettles both the epistemological foundations of urbanism and the spatial limits imposed on Indigenous politics.

This article intervenes in these debates by arguing that Latin American cities are emerging as critical arenas in which Indigenous territoriality is being reworked, asserted, and governed. It conceptualises Indigenous urbanisation not as assimilation or detachment from ancestral worlds, but as an expansion of territorial life that generates new configurations of authority, governance, and socio-ecological practice. The intention is not to displace the importance of rural Indigenous territorial struggles, but to overcome the binary that positions the urban as a space of Indigenous absence. Building from Dorn & Hafner (2023), Haesbaert & Mason-Deese (2020), Halvorsen (2019), and Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), the argument proceeds from the understanding that territory is a relational and political process continuously enacted through collective practices that sustain life. Indigenous territoriality is not negated by migration; it becomes multi-sited and multi-territorial (Ortega-Iturriaga et al., 2024).

Mobility generates new spaces of belonging rather than rupture. Urban Indigenous territoriality thus re-scales the territorial horizon, asserting Indigenous presence as structural across the entire nation-state (Canessa & Picq, 2024). Through ritual, ecological restoration, community organisation, and legal challenge, Indigenous collectives contest the state's spatial hierarchies and racialised governance logics that render them invisible. These shifting territorial practices also shape the frameworks through which Indigenous communities understand and enact their relations with land, life, and the urban environment. Indigenous ontologies embed longstanding principles of relational sustainability, understanding territory as ecological and spiritual interdependence. In this context, Indigenous climate urbanism emerges as a praxis that binds climate adaptation to territorial sovereignty, care, and resistance to extractive urban development. Here, decolonial urbanism becomes a lived practice rather than solely a critique, shaping alternative socio-ecological futures from within the city.

The exploration proceeds as follows. The next section reconceptualises Indigenous territoriality beyond the rural/urban divide, situating it within Latin American debates on territory as life, resistance, and relation. It then examines how Indigenous collectives, focusing on Mapuche organisations in Santiago de Chile, materialise territorial claims through environmental stewardship, spiritual practice, and community mobilisation. A subsequent section brings these insights into conversation with discussions on Indigenous climate urbanism, highlighting how Indigenous actors enact forms of urban governance grounded in reciprocity, care, and ecological endurance. The conclusion argues for recognising the city itself as a legitimate terrain of Indigenous futurity, where ancestral and contemporary forms of life converge in the struggle for decolonial

ecological justice – dismantling oppressive structures and cultivating urban environments grounded in Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty.

## Indigenous urban territoriality: Territory beyond physical space

Indigenous territoriality has long been central to Latin American struggles for autonomy and self-determination. Since the "territorial turn" of the 1990s, following the ratification of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 169, territory has become both the symbol and substance of Indigenous political resurgence (Dorn & Hafner, 2023). Yet in Indigenous thought, territory is not merely physical or legal; it is an ontology of life, a relational matrix that interweaves memory, ecology, spirituality, and governance. This holistic understanding stands in sharp contrast to the Eurocentric neoliberal conception of territory as a bounded, measurable, and ownable object. For most Indigenous peoples, land is inseparable from social, cosmological, and ecological relations; defending territory is therefore a matter of sustaining life itself.

This understanding reflects a broader view across many Indigenous communities within and beyond Latin America, where territory is conceived not as a bounded parcel of land but as an ongoing web of relationships among people, non-human beings, and collectively lived spaces. As extensively discussed by human geographers (see, among others, Halvorsen, 2019; Radcliffe, 2017), this perspective dismantles modernist dichotomies such as nature versus society and the material versus the spiritual, while rejecting capitalist logics of accumulation and commodification. Indigenous territoriality is therefore processual: it is enacted continuously through ritual, governance, ecological care, and everyday practices that reproduce life. Halvorsen (2019) emphasises a definition of territory as open and relational, wherein appropriation and use of space are inseparable from collective political projects, enabling multiple strategies, from grassroots action to institutional negotiation, to coexist and interact. To decolonise territory, then, is to cultivate an ecology of knowledges, challenging epistemological hierarchies naturalised by colonial history and asserting Indigenous ways of knowing as foundational to governance and environmental stewardship.

Indigenous urbanism is a direct expression of this relational ontology in the city, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous spatial logics intersect, collide, and co-create. Cities become not merely sites of settlement but arenas of coexistence, spaces where alternative ways of being urban can be performed and imagined. Recognising cities as Indigenous spaces challenges conventional notions of urban modernity (Porter, 2016), transforming them from containers of capital and administrative order into terrains of relational life. Yet the conditions for such coexistence remain highly unequal. Indigenous migrants are often relegated to peripheral or informal settlements, exposing them to systemic marginalisation produced by intersecting hierarchies of race, class, and capital.

Urban governance and neoliberal planning often treat Indigenous urban presence as anomalous, symbolic, or merely folkloric, erasing claims to territory as

a living, political, and ecological practice. Paradoxically, these urban margins have become sites of indigenisation as re-territorialisation, where Indigenous worlds are actively extended and re-created. The urban condition is therefore multi-sited and diasporic, characterised by attachments to multiple spaces through memory, ritual, language, and ecological practice (Brablec, 2025). The Mapuche population in Chile exemplifies this dynamic: more Mapuche now reside in Santiago than in their ancestral territory of Wallmapu. Yet official discourse frames their presence as inauthentic, while Indigenous Law 19.253 (1993) recognises collective land rights in rural areas, leaving urban Mapuche without effective mechanisms for territorial recognition. It is important to note that structural incentives sustaining rural-urban migration, as living conditions in ancestral rural territories, remain challenging. Nevertheless, these exclusions have been contested.

Organisations such as the Dhegñ Winkul association in Santiago assert urban Mapuche presence through spiritual, ecological, and political practices, drawing on ILO Convention 169 to advocate for the recognition of territorial being. As reported by Chilean media (see, for instance, Molina, 2025, for Emol), the Dhegñ Winkul association has raised concerns about a proposed Cencosud shopping mall located in proximity to ancestral and cultural sites. The National Corporation for Indigenous Development (CONADI) has formally expressed concern to the Environmental Assessment Service that the US$125 million project could affect the association's ruka (traditional Mapuche house, used for cultural, spiritual, and communal purposes), as well as local flora, fauna, and archaeological sites. Dhegñ Winkul has requested that their cultural rituals be respected, proposed that Indigenous products be incorporated into the mall, and even suggested renaming the mall using local Indigenous toponymy: "Füta Kurra" (meaning "great stone" in Mapudungun, the Mapuche language), rather than "Vitacura", the name of the municipality where the project is emplaced.

From an urban Indigenous territorial perspective, this case illustrates the challenges of protecting Indigenous cultural and spiritual spaces within highly urbanised contexts. It highlights how Indigenous groups assert territorial presence and cultural rights in the city, and how urban development projects can threaten these practices and connections. Dhegñ Winkul's activism thus transforms urban space from a mere "development site" into an "Indigenous place", where ancestral cosmologies, communal governance, and ecological stewardship converge (Brablec, 2020). Indigenous urbanism thus unsettles the epistemological boundaries between modern and Indigenous, urban and rural. Ritual practice, ecological restoration, and community governance have the capacity to generate territories of care, countering neoliberal logics of commodification and marginalisation. Community gardens, ceremonial sites, and cultural centres are not merely symbolic but embodied infrastructures that reproduce Indigenous worlds within cities, creating ecological and social reconfigurations across distances.

These urban practices reveal the inadequacy of the rural imaginary and call for a rethinking of the very concept of territory. Territory must be understood as situated relationality: an ongoing negotiation among people, places, memories, and institutions. It is not a fixed surface to be divided or owned but a dynamic, relational process that encompasses co-presence, care, and reciprocity. Indigenous struggles over urban territory are fundamentally struggles over ontology; that is, over which ways of being and relating to space are legitimised within governance systems. Rituals, protests, and spatial occupations reclaim urban environments as living entities rather than mere administrative or economic categories, introducing alternative logics of stewardship, reciprocity, and territorial responsibility.

Concrete examples illustrate these dynamics. In Santiago, Mapuche urban gardens, cultural centres, and ceremonial spaces exemplify the enactment of territorial relations through embodied ecological practice. The Mahuidache community in El Bosque (one of Santiago's 52 municipalities), for instance, has reclaimed degraded plots by cultivating native plants for medicinal and ceremonial use, restoring urban ecologies while providing space for social interaction and cultural reproduction. Similarly, the community of Pueblo de San Sebastián Xoco in Mexico City has taken legal action against federal and city authorities, arguing that the Mítikah real-estate development was built on part of their ancestral territory without proper free, prior, and informed consent or any participatory mechanism for assessing environmental, social, or cultural impacts, as required under ILO Convention 169 (Alonso Viña, 2022, for *El País*). Recognising Indigenous territoriality in cities requires an epistemological shift by seeing territory as life in relation. Planning, climate adaptation, and urban governance must adopt principles of relational stewardship, in which humans, non-humans, and landscapes are co-constitutive, and solutions are co-created, with Indigenous epistemologies respected and legitimised. In this way, Indigenous urban practices prefigure decolonial forms of environmental governance, reimagining the city as an ecological and spiritual commons rather than as an exclusivist site of extraction, segregation, or investment.

## Indigenous climate urbanism: Relational ecologies and urban governance

Climate change has heightened existing contradictions within Latin American urbanisation. As drought, flooding, heat islands, and pollution intensify, their effects disproportionately burden racialised and low-income residents (Hardoy & Pandiella, 2009). Indigenous peoples, often positioned within peri-urban or informal settlements as a result of historical dispossession, face the compounded vulnerabilities of climate exposure and systemic marginalisation. Yet despite being disproportionately affected, they remain structurally excluded from climate governance regimes that privilege expert-driven and market-oriented interventions. Adaptation strategies framed through "green" urbanism frequently reinforce gentrification and dispossession, entrenching the colonial and racial

foundations of environmental management by raising land values, tightening zoning regimes, and displacing those who have already borne the social costs of environmental degradation. While scholarship on climate urbanism has illuminated how cities reorganise governance, infrastructure, and investment under conditions of climate crisis, it remains primarily concerned with the institutional, technical, and managerial responses of states and multilateral actors. Resilience planning, green infrastructure, and carbon governance have dominated the agenda, while Indigenous ecological ontologies and territorial practices remain largely absent (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022). This absence is not accidental: it emerges from the deeper ruralisation of indigeneity in both academic and policy frameworks. Because Indigenous life is still framed as inherently rural, forms of environmental governance emerging from Indigenous urban communities rarely register as climate action within dominant conceptual frameworks.

It is within this gap that Indigenous climate urbanism can be situated. As presented in this exploratory article, the term refers to climate-related practices, territorial enactments, and socio-ecological forms of governance developed by Indigenous peoples in cities, grounded in relational ontologies that understand land, water, and multispecies coexistence as the basis of political authority. Indigenous climate urbanism repositions climate adaptation not as a technical challenge but as a struggle over colonial spatial orders, territorial sovereignty, and the right to shape urban socio-ecological futures. Rather than replicating the managerial logics of mainstream climate urbanism, it foregrounds reciprocity, collective care, and territorial responsibility as essential components of climate resilience. Building on the earlier discussion of the rural bias in climate-Indigenous research, it becomes evident that urban environments remain largely overlooked from a territorial-environmental perspective (for the rural Mapuche case in Chile, see for example Arias-Bustamante & Innes, 2020; Carmona, 2024). This gap shapes how Indigenous ecological strategies in cities are interpreted, often leading them to be dismissed as peripheral or merely cultural, rather than recognised as governance practices with concrete ecological effects. The continued reluctance to recognise Indigenous territoriality in urban settings reinforces this misclassification, obscuring the significance of their climate-related interventions.

Yet across Latin American urban contexts, Indigenous actors are advancing alternative ecological imaginaries anchored in relational ontologies. In Santiago, Mapuche organisations enact everyday practices of itrofillmongen; that is, the interconnectedness of all life, by cultivating medicinal and native plants, restoring polluted soils, and protecting water sources damaged by privatised extraction. These are not merely gardens but extensions of the Wallmapu, the ancestral territory, within the city, forming relational infrastructures that nourish, heal, and offer possibilities for cultural reconstruction. In Buenos Aires and La Plata, Nam Qom solidarity networks protect cultural knowledge while organising economies of coexistence based on mutual support (Voscoboinik, 2025). In La Paz, Aymara groups revitalise peri-urban lands and community bonds through ayni

(reciprocity) and rituals such as ch'alla (thanksgiving) (Alderman, 2021). Across these diverse contexts, ecological care becomes a decolonial urban politics that challenges extractivist logics and affirms Indigenous territoriality as a living practice. Across these contexts, ecological action becomes a decolonial urban politics of care, asserting Indigenous relational ontologies against the extractivist and speculative logics that structure Latin American urbanisation.

These initiatives also operate as climate-adaptation strategies. In rapidly warming and water-stressed cities such as Santiago, which is now facing over sixteen years of severe drought (Cooperativa, 2025), decentralised forms of environmental stewardship, small-scale food cultivation, and the use of local, climate-responsive materials contribute to greater resilience. Such practices can mitigate urban heat stress, support local ecosystems, and regenerate degraded environments. More broadly, they reinforce an expanding recognition that ecological resilience is inseparable from cultural resilience. As Haesbaert & Mason-Deese (2020) argue, ethnodiversity and biodiversity are deeply interdependent, as the loss of one accelerates the decline of the other. Strengthening urban biodiversity, therefore, requires not only symbolic recognition of cultural difference but the practical incorporation of diverse territorial governance systems into climate-adaptation planning.

Yet despite growing acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous knowledge, such recognition rarely translates into institutional authority or policy change. Viswanathan (2023) highlights a profound gap in understanding how Indigenous peoples are included, if at all, in local climate planning across Latin America. Urban Indigenous territoriality remains conceptually constrained by planning systems that define space through private property and zoning, erasing collective or spiritual understandings of land. Even where tentative efforts exist, such as participatory initiatives in La Paz and Quito that incorporate ceremonial practices and recognise sacred sites (Horn, 2018), these remain isolated exceptions rather than transformative governance shifts. The case of Chile underscores both the challenge and its urgency. Mapuche-ness in urban contexts becomes celebrated and contained within the neoliberal multicultural logic of the Chilean state, framed through the concept of the indio permitido as originally coined by Rivera Cusicanqui (2004) and popularised by Hale & Millamán (2006).

Cultural expressions are welcomed when they remain symbolic and non-threatening, while broader political and territorial demands are administratively neutralised through the bureaucratising and NGO-ising tendencies imposed on Mapuche collective life. As a result, Mapuche rights are treated as matters belonging exclusively to the rural sphere, and even then, only in a limited form. Although the state publicly praises Mapuche cultural heritage, the legal framework of Indigenous Law 19.253 (1993) confines official recognition to rural communities, effectively denying territoriality and Indigenous presence in cities such as Santiago. The recent constitutional process in 2022 briefly opened possibilities for reimagining plurinational governance across rural-urban continuums, yet its rejection reaffirmed the political difficulty of expanding territorial

rights. Still, the debates leave an important conceptual inheritance: Indigenous presence in cities must be understood as politically legitimate, historically grounded, and environmentally necessary.

Consequently, dominant planning regimes routinely subordinate Indigenous spatial practices and territorial imaginaries, diminishing their political authority and obscuring the value of their knowledge and labour, thereby perpetuating urban inequalities. When Indigenous collectives drive urban development, it enables alternative economic pathways grounded in situated cultural economies, such as land and water stewardship, communal food infrastructures, traditional construction knowledges, and community-based tourism, that expand the repertoire of strategies for urban resilience under the climate crisis. Meaningful participation of Indigenous actors in the governance of planning institutions, housing systems, and climate adaptation bodies is therefore not merely a remedial gesture of recognition; it forms an essential component of collective survival and socio-ecological reconfiguration in an era of planetary disruption. Drawing these dynamics together, this article frames Indigenous climate urbanism as a sociopolitical field constituted through relational ecologies and everyday practices of territorial care. These practices reveal adaptation as an ontological process that challenges the modern/colonial separation of nature and society embedded in contemporary urban governance. Within this framework, cities emerge as socioecological and spiritual commons co-produced by human and more-than-human relations (Escobar, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017). Indigenous territoriality in urban contexts should thus be understood not as a residual imprint of rural indigeneity, but as a generative horizon for alternative urban futures, in which sustainability is grounded in reciprocity, collective authority, and the flourishing of the diverse beings that compose the territory.

## Conclusion: The city as a site of Indigenous futurity

Reframing cities as Indigenous territories challenges foundational assumptions of Latin American urban modernity. The city, historically coded as mestizo, secular, and modern, has long been positioned as the spatial opposite of Indigenous life. Yet contemporary urbanisation reveals a different reality: Indigenous peoples are not arriving from outside the city, but reasserting themselves within spaces that have always been structured by their erasure. Santiago, La Paz, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and other urban centres have become crucial arenas in which Indigenous actors contest colonial geographies and demand political contemporaneity.

This exploration has argued that Indigenous urban territoriality requires a conceptual shift in the sociological study of both territory and urbanism. Territory emerges not as a bounded spatial unit but as a relational, processual, and multi-sited form of social organisation. Urban Indigenous territorial practices demonstrate that belonging is enacted through ongoing relationships among people, memory, land, and non-human life, thus extending beyond the fixed rural

imaginaries that states and scholarship still reproduce. The Chilean case illustrates the contradictions of neoliberal multiculturalism: a regime that celebrates cultural difference as heritage while preserving planning, property, and environmental governance systems that deny Indigenous collective rights within cities. It is precisely within these tensions that new territorial ontologies and urban political subjectivities take shape.

A sociological engagement with these transformations brings critical questions to the forefront: In what ways does Indigenous collective work reconfigure urban space as a site of political, ecological, and spiritual authority? How do new forms of decision-making and knowledge production emerge when Indigenous epistemologies shape urban climate adaptation and resource governance? And how can urban recognition of Indigenous territorial rights be negotiated in ways that uphold political claims and coexist with longstanding rural and ancestral sovereignties, rather than being co-opted or contained by state frameworks? These questions reposition Indigenous actors not as peripheral "stakeholders" but as co-producers of urban theory, policy, and planetary futures. They call for sociologies that confront ongoing coloniality, examining how inequalities are reproduced through urban infrastructures, law, and planning while also attending to the creative strategies of survival and resurgence that Indigenous communities enact daily.

In contexts marked by the convergence of climate crisis, extractive development, and racialised precarity, the recognition of Indigenous urban territoriality provides both a critical lens and a practical prospect for rethinking the city. Indigenous urban practices challenge the neoliberal separation of society and nature, reconceptualising cities as relational ecologies structured around reciprocity, care, and the sustained valuation of land and water. As the collective work of Mapuche and other Indigenous peoples demonstrates, the city is not simply a space of constraint; it is a site where Indigenous futures are enacted through intertwined spiritual, ecological, and political labour. Expanding Indigenous governance and representation within urban planning and decision-making is therefore not merely a question of formal rights, but of social and ecological survival, innovation, and justice. The development of climate-resilient and socially equitable cities in Latin America depends on treating Indigenous urban territoriality as legitimate, structural, and transformative, thus positioning cities as terrains of Indigenous futurity rather than instruments of ethnic erasure.

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