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## INTRODUCTION

# Indigenous Resurgence, Decolonization, and Movements for Environmental Justice

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### Setting the Stage

In multiple sites across the world, Indigenous peoples are leading political and social movements for environmental justice. Indigenous history, politics, epistemologies and resistance have much to offer in the way of advancing an aggressive agenda to mitigate climate change—Indigenous communities and collectives across the planet currently protect eighty percent of the world’s biodiversity and climate science has repeatedly indicated that water, land, and ecosystems under the care and governance of Indigenous peoples have been kept more in-tact in terms of species survival and the retention of intact and functioning ecosystems, and they are less ravaged by the longstanding impact of global racial capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Indigenous peoples are holding the line against some of the most destructive and violent environmental projects, both slow and fast, across the globe.

In Indigenous North America, as a case in point, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe spearheaded the resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline and historic environmental damage to the Missouri River, and a collective of Indigenous land and water defenders are actively mobilizing in opposition to Enbridge’s Line 3—a pipeline that would traverse Anishinaabe land in Minnesota, deeply impacting wild rice production and contaminating waterways. Indigenous Newar communities in Nepal have been protesting the Fast Track Road Project and other destructive development projects. Responses to climate change in Peru are also being conceptualized and enacted by Indigenous youth who are on the frontlines of the latest

forms of colonial devastation. And in India, Adivasi communities are organizing against the exclusion of traditionally dependent forest communities from equal participation in forest governance.<sup>2</sup> These are only a few examples of the strategic ways in which Indigenous peoples are challenging structures of contemporary global racial capitalism, standing up and speaking out to protect the land, water, and air from further contamination and ruination, and embodying long-standing forms of relationality and kinship that counter Western epistemologies of human/nature dualism. As the essays in this collection will reveal, Indigenous peoples are mapping the contours of alternative modes of social, political, and economic organization that speak to the past, present, *and* the future—catapulting us into a moment of critical, radical reflection about the substantive scope and limitations of “mainstream environmentalism”<sup>3</sup> and demanding that this movement be accountable, first and foremost, to the struggle for Native liberation alongside the liberation of all colonized peoples.

The idea for this edited collection first originated in the Fall of 2016 during a conversation I had with anthropologist Paige West while we were organizing in New York City in support of the Standing Rock Sioux’s resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline through the New York Stands with Standing Rock Collective. Our discussion circulated around the notable lack of Indigenous writers, thinkers, and political organizers being published in environmental studies journals and in public media platforms (often publishing pieces that are deeply apolitical and ahistorical), and the paucity of literature in academic and journalistic arenas that made explicit linkages between colonialism and climate change<sup>4</sup> as well as highlighted the histories of resistance of frontline Indigenous communities, many of whom have been fighting against the environmental violence of colonialism since the onset of occupation in what is now known as the United States of America.<sup>5</sup> Academia, has, in fact, played an *active role* in perpetuating colonial relations of power by subverting and sidelining the theorizing, research, writing, and movement organizing efforts of Indigenous scholars and their allies who are challenging historical and present-day conditions of dispossession, violent state formation, white supremacy, violence, criminalization, as well as the economic structures of global capitalism that have concentrated power and wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of many. Our collective effort to offer an intervention, an anti-colonial counterpoint to the epistemic violence of academic knowledge production in the growing fields of environmental anthropology, political ecology, and environmental studies more generally, became a special issue of *Environment and Society* upon which this edited collection is based—now converted into book form and more urgently needed than ever.

Those who are fervently working on issues of environmental justice and climate change know the stakes of what we are facing. While the contours of this book took shape several years back it is being published at a time when the world is teetering on the precipice of irreversible climate change,<sup>6</sup> on a planet where millions of people are dispossessed and live in conditions of severe deprivation (as of 2021, 696 million human beings live in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day)<sup>7</sup>—a planet where fascism and authoritarianism are on the rise, where access to water is becoming increasingly precarious and at the same time massive floods are expected to displace millions of people, where migration is met with the increasing securitization and militarization of colonial borders that are resulting in violent and deadly assaults on families and their relations, where children are separated from their parents and caged in detention facilities—entirely closed off from the outside world, where the murders of everyday Brown, Black, and Indigenous people are sanctioned by the state and go unseen and often uncontested.

We are living in a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the worlds in different ways, with varying degrees and scales of exposure, vulnerability, stress, and uncertainty. This deeply troubling context of ongoing violence and suffering requires being honest about the injustices and inequalities that have long existed but are rising to the fore as the virus moves across the planet. Here on Turtle Island, we have seen the ways that structural

colonial violence has created ideal conditions for the virus to have devastating impacts on Indigenous, Black, and Latino communities, on migrants being held in detention centers, and on countless people who are imprisoned because of a racist and colonial criminal justice system—all of this, of course, is a continuation of the oppressive structures that have long existed.<sup>8</sup> The fractures and failings of privatized health care were ever more apparent in the midst of our “global lockdown” and we have seen how our “essential workers”—the people who make day to day life in this country possible—remained subject to exposure as they continued to work on the frontlines of colonial systems of food distribution, transportation, and health care.

To say it simply: we need radical changes in our social, political, and economic systems and we need them now. A centralized focus on environmental justice is not about creating an isolated silo in which all of us committed to this work can go about our business—it is about understanding and acting upon the foundational significance of decolonial knowledge, history, and resistance in everything we do and this means supporting the work of Indigenous leaders across the world who are charting a different path into the future across multiple avenues of social, political and economic life. The “environment” is everything, everywhere.

Turning towards Indigenous resurgence also demands centering decolonial epistemologies and cosmologies that challenge dominant, colonial, and Eurocentric knowledge systems while promoting the dismantling of the social and political and knowledge-based infrastructure necessary to sustain white settler society—a decolonial epistemology that is necessarily unsettling, anti-hegemonic, anchored to the political goals of anti-colonial liberation struggles and works against the accumulation and reproduction of settler histories. Such perspectives also reject the privileging of dualism, “universal truths,” and the normalization of dominant Eurodescendant epistemologies that actively work to silence, invisibilize, and delegitimize other ways of knowing and constructing meaning about the world.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge matters.

Perhaps one of the most distinct signposts of a decolonial epistemology has to do with the meaning of land. What I have learned over the years from leaders like Ladonna Bravebull Allard and Freda Huson is that resistance to extractive, fossil fuel projects is not just a struggle over the preservation of the environment—the *land* upon which the Oceti Sakowin and the Wet’suwet’en people have lived for hundreds of years, far before the creation of the settler colonies of the United States of America and Canada, is life itself. It is home. It is memory. It is the keeper of ancestral stories and intergenerational truths. It provides sustenance and medicines in the every day. It marks time. It offers creative guidance and makes certain kinds of ceremonies possible. It teaches. It adapts. It produces life. And it carries the ecological, social and political history upon which a peoples’ move into the future. Susan Hill remarks in *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River*, “for the Haudenosaunee, land is possibly the best point of reference for considering history. Historical knowledge and lessons embodied in the Haudenosaunee cultural history demonstrate land and territory as the prime determinants of Haudenosaunee identity. So if one seeks to understand Haudenosaunee history one must consider the history of Haudenosaunee land” (2017 p. 3). When we think of land through the resistance efforts of Indigenous communities, then, we are immediately confronted with questions of colonialism, of occupation, of domination, and multiple forms of epistemic violence that quite literally fuel the transformation of the environment. We are forced to ask: what would it mean to put the land first?<sup>10</sup>

Alongside decolonial conceptualizations of the meaning of land, a focus on Indigenous resurgence as it relates to questions of environmental justice and climate change necessarily pivots to ecologies of resistance and practices of solidarity. How do we engage in debates and dialogues about power and history in our everyday organizing in order to knit together our social positions and experiences of oppression, marginalization, *and* resistance while being attentive to the specificities of particular struggles—resonant with Jacqui Alexander’s

call for feminists of color to become “fluent in each other’s histories” (Alexander 2006) and Angela Davis’s plea to foster “unlikely coalitions” (Davis 1998). How do we develop stronger relationships with one another that enact material solidarity, explore the ways that we our stories and lives have become co-constituted and identify the spaces within intellectual and organizing contexts that enable the fostering of a critical relationality and center multiple colonial histories?

Importantly, global Indigenous land and water defense also illuminates the importance of adopting an internationalist, anti-imperialist lens in the context of solidarity movements. The United States has contributed more to the problem of excess carbon dioxide than any other country on the planet. According to Worldwatch Institute, “The United States, with less than 5% of the global population, uses about a quarter of the world’s fossil fuel resources—burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world’s natural gas.” The U.S. Department of Defense is both the country’s and the world’s, largest polluter; in fact, U.S. military bases rank as some of the most polluted places on the planet. Indeed, with a sprawling network of bases and logistics networks, the U.S. military is the single biggest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world aside from whole nation-states themselves. The struggle for climate justice here in Native North America, then, is also an internationalist fight against American imperialism—the land and water-based struggles in the United States serves as inspiration for other communities fighting racial capitalism and environmental devastation all over the world.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Context of Indigenous Inclusion in Environmental Politics and Overview of the Book**

Within the mainstream environmental justice movement, the knowledge and social practices of Indigenous communities have sparked considerable attention. Indeed, in the wake of a planetwide movement riddled with idioms about “saving our home,” there has been a tidal wave of interest in Indigenous knowledge(s) about the land, water, and sky—a desire to “capture and store” the intergenerational wisdom that speaks to the unpredictable path lying ahead. For instance, littered throughout academic writing, climate justice protests, and climate science reports are a host of references to the importance of harnessing Indigenous knowledge systems in the service of global sustainability. As a case in point, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change summary report for 2014 asserts: “Indigenous, local, and traditional knowledge systems and practices, including indigenous peoples’ holistic view of community and environment, are a major resource for adapting to climate change, but these have not been used consistently in existing adaptation efforts. *Integrating* such forms of knowledge with existing practices increases the effectiveness of adaptation” (IPCC 2014, 26 emphasis added). More recently, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and former US President Barack Obama issued a joint statement on climate, energy, and Arctic leadership that makes an explicit reference to Indigenous science and traditional knowledge by stating that, “Canada and the US are committed to collaborating with Indigenous and Arctic governments, leaders, and communities to more broadly and respectfully *include* Indigenous science and traditional knowledge into decision making, including environmental assessments, resource management, and advancing our understanding of climate change and how best to manage its effect” (PMO 2016, emphasis added). Particularly noteworthy within both of these frames is the vernacular of integration and inclusion that underlies the broader impetus for seeking Indigenous knowledge.

While at first glance these inclusionary politics could be considered to be a move in the right direction—the “integration” of Indigenous knowledge as something to be used in the interests of global recovery from environmental crisis—it merits a deeper and more

nanced reading. Pushing us to consider the problematics associated with state-driven “discovery” of Indigenous knowledge, Deborah McGregor highlights the way in which Indigenous knowledge of the environment is derived through a living process that stems from Indigenous relationships to “Creation.” It is produced through a body of ancient thought, experience and *action*— it is generated by the *things that one does* rather than something that one simply knows. She argues, “The ‘natural world,’ ‘environment,’ or ‘Creation’ is an essential part of the conception of Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is not just ‘knowledge’ per se. It is the lives lived by people and their particular relationship with Creation” (McGregor 2004, 390). From McGregor’s perspective, Indigenous knowledge is not a noun, it is not a commodity or product that can be drawn upon as a last-ditch effort to be integrated into a battalion of adaptive solutions to save us all. To acquire this knowledge means entirely shifting our current patterns of living in the everyday—it is cumulative and dynamic, adaptive and ancestral, and it is produced in a collective process that is fundamentally centered on the *way* one relates. Mishuana Goeman furthers this point when she speaks of the complexity, history, and political vitality in *a storied land*—a land that literally and figuratively acts as a placeholder that moves through time and situates Indigenous knowledges (Goeman, 2008: 24). “Indigenous scholars” Goeman writes, “must continue to think of space or the function of land as more than a site *upon* which humans make history or as a location that accumulates history” (Goeman, 2008: 24).

We might ask, then, whose interests are being served by attempts to extract and distill bits and pieces of Indigenous knowledge to work in the service of climate recovery? What is lost in this process of “integration” when it is not occurring in conjunction with moves toward decolonization that center the question of colonization and its impacts, when there is not a clear intention to understand how the colonial spatial restructuring of the land has affected Indigenous relationships to land? Despite the fixation on Indigenous knowledge systems, it seems, limited attempts have been made to theorize how conquest and persistent settler colonial violence necessarily factor into debates over the climate crisis and environmental injustice more generally—this, despite the creation of territories of material and psychic abandonment largely fuelled by white settlers and “settlement.” Critical questions need to be asked: How are Indigenous political demands for decolonization taken up within the broader scope of planetary dystopia, impending for some and already here for others? How might “environmental justice” work to (re)inscribe hegemonies of settler colonial power by foregrounding settler interests? How do the experiences of older, younger and not-yet-here generations factor into thinking through strategies for combatting environmental injustice? In a similar vein, Zoe Todd (2016) asks: “What does it mean to have a reciprocal discourse on catastrophic end times and apocalyptic environmental change in a place where, over the last 500 years, Indigenous peoples faced (and face) the end of the worlds with the violent incursion of colonial ideologies and actions? What does it mean to hold, in simultaneous tension, stories of the Anthropocene in the past, present, and future?” (Todd, 2016).

To address these lines of inquiry, this book aims to set forth a theoretical and discursive interruption of the dominant, mainstream environmental justice movement by reframing issues of climate change and environmental degradation through an anti-colonial lens. Specifically, the writers for this collection are invested in positioning environmental justice within historical, social, political, and economic contexts and larger structures of power that foreground the relationships among settler colonialism, nature, and planetary devastation. The nine critical appraisals presented here also move across a range of socio-political spaces and realities (ranging from site-specific resistance efforts to broader theoretical discussions) and thus carry significant import when translated to an anti-colonial deconstruction of the underlying politics and ideologies inherent to the dominant environmental justice movement as a whole. By offering this range of perspectives this volume reaches to:

- 1) illuminate how mainstream environmental justice politics are inherently preoccupied

with the maintenance of settler state sovereignty and settler futurity; 2) showcase how Indigenous struggles to protect and defend the land, water, and air are embedded within Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies that fundamentally challenge settler domination over nature and are inextricably linked to advancing decolonization; and 3) raise important questions about solidarity and politicized allyship with Indigenous communities as they engage in resistance efforts to protect their homelands and assert political claims for self-determination.

The book opens with “*Mino-Mnaadmodzawin: Achieving Indigenous Environmental Justice in Canada*,” an essay by Deborah McGregor. The article explores the potential for advancing environmental justice (EJ) theory and practice by engaging with Indigenous intellectual traditions. In particular, McGregor highlights the reemergence of the philosophy referred to by the Anishinaabe as *mino-mnaadmodzawin* (living well or the “good life”). Common to numerous Indigenous epistemologies, this philosophy considers the critical importance of mutually respectful and beneficial relationships not only among peoples, but among all relations.

Next, in “Decolonizing Development in Diné Bikeyah: Resource Extraction, Anti-capitalism, and Relational Futures,” Melanie Yazzie employs an Indigenous feminist perspective to take us to the homelands of the Navajo Nation where resisters are fighting “natural resource” extraction through anti-capitalist and anti-development politics. Yazzie deftly argues that development is not only a violent modality of capitalism, but in its connection to resource extraction is also a violent form of extractivism that seeks to kill Diné life. Several concerns raised by Yazzie are mirrored in Anne Spice’s “Fighting Invasive Infrastructure: Indigenous Relations Against Pipelines” in which pipeline politics take center stage. Spice’s article tracks how the state discourse of “critical infrastructure” naturalizes the environmental destruction wrought by the oil and gas industry while criminalizing Indigenous resistance.

Questions of infrastructure and development are, of course, tied to particular conceptualizations of land and human relationships to and with it. In their essay “Unsettling the Land: Indigeneity, Ontology, and Hybridity in Settler Colonialism,” Paul Burow, Samara Brock, and Michael R. Dove examine different ontologies of land in settler colonialism and Indigenous movements for decolonization and environmental justice. “Hunting for Justice: An Indigenous Critique of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation,” by Lauren Eichler and David Baumeister, complements this critical engagement with land ontologies by problematizing wildlife conservation policies and related hunting regulations that are antithetical to Indigenous views, interrupt Indigenous lifeways, and contribute to the destruction of Indigenous identity.

Moving to a critical analysis of symbolic power within the mainstream environmental justice movement, Rebekah Sinclair’s “Righting Names: The Importance of Native American Philosophies of Naming For Environmental Justice” explores the politics and history of naming places, landmarks, environments, and species. To counter longstanding colonial practices of naming, Sinclair points toward several principles of Indigenous naming and considers how Native names reflect relational ontologies and are thus central components in creating Indigenous communities, which include both human and nonhuman agents.

Tracing the problematics of colonial political power, “Damaging Environments: Land, Settle Colonialism, and Security for Indigenous Peoples” by Wilfrid Greaves theorizes why Indigenous peoples’ security claims fail to be accepted by government authorities and/or incorporated into the security policies and practices of settler states. By engaging the concepts of securitization and ontological security, Wilfrid explicates how Indigenous peoples are blocked from ‘speaking’ security to the state.

In “Settler Colonialism, Ecology and Environmental Injustice” Kyle Whyte circles back to a crucial and critical appraisal of settler colonialism as it is intertwined directly with

environmental justice. Whyte characterizes settler colonialism as ecological domination, as a form of governance committing environmental injustice against Indigenous peoples and other groups. Focusing on the context of Indigenous peoples facing domination in the United States, this article also investigates, philosophically, how settler colonialism commits environmental injustice.

The book concludes with an article by Joe Curnow and Anjai Helferty entitled “Contradictions of Solidarity: Whiteness, Settler Coloniality, and the Mainstream Environmental Movement.” Here, Curnow and Helferty bring forth essential questions about the racialized and colonial underpinnings of mainstream environmentalism and highlight implications of this history for solidarity work and politicized allyship with Indigenous nations.

Taken together, this collection of articles provide a powerful anticolonial counterscript to the assumptions and underlying political ideologies of the mainstream environmental justice movement. They remind us of the fundamental importance of placing Indigenous politics, histories and ontologies at the center of our social movements for environmental justice. And they make clear that contemporary manifestations of colonial violence are deeply interconnected with environmental violence. Arundhati Roy writes in her conclusion to *Walking With the Comrades*, “If there is any hope for the world at all, it does not live in climate change conference rooms or in cities with tall buildings. It lives low down on the ground, with its arms around the people who go to battle every day to protect their forests, their mountains, and their rivers because they know that the forests, the mountains and the rivers protect them. .... the first step towards reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination.” The perspectives brought forward in this book present glimpses into this kind of imagination and present alternative ways of building relations with one another and the world around us—a guidepost for beginning to conceptualize and embody decolonization centered on the restoration of Indigenous modes of relating that privilege interconnection, interdependence, and the continuity of life. They offer us a series of lifelines.

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#### ■ NOTES

1. Please see Cedric Robinson’s (1983) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* for a fulsome account of this theory of racial capitalism.
2. See <https://science.thewire.in/environment/advansi-struggle-environmental-justice-consent-principle-economic-development/>

3. For an excellent synopsis of “mainstream environmentalism” see Paige West and Dan Brockington’s “Introduction: Capitalism and the Environment” in *Environment and Society* Vol. 3, 2012, pp. 1–3.
4. These linkages are hauntingly and beautifully captured in Esme Murdock’s (2021) recent essay “On Telling the Truth Unflinchingly: Climate Catastrophe and Colonialism.” Murdock writes, “The horrors of the last 500 years on Turtle Island (North America)—and the planet, more generally—are obvious, well-studied, and well-known. These histories live in the minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits of the global populations who have borne the brunt and lived the apocalypses that white supremacist colonization, imperialism, and capitalism have created and continue to create. And yet, within all this, people are still attempting to carve out a space of innocence—a hiding place beneath, within, or close to whiteness that might protect them.”
5. As Dina Gillio-Whitaker reminds us, “It [this book] starts from the assumption that colonization was not just a process of invasion and eventual domination of Indigenous populations by European settlers but also that the eliminatory impulse and structure it created in actuality began as environmental injustice. Seen in this light, settler colonialism itself is for Indigenous peoples a structure of environmental injustice (2019 p. 12).
6. See the recent report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released in August 2021, for the latest research on worldwide climate crisis. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>
7. See <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/03/decades-of-progress-on-extreme-poverty-now-in-reverse-due-to-covid> and <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/march-2021-global-poverty-update-world-bank>
8. For more information on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 along race and class lines, please see: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/communities-of-color-devastated-by-covid-19-shifting-the-narrative-202102221201>
9. For more on decolonial epistemology please see Esme Murdock’s “Unsettling Reconciliation: Decolonial Methods for Transforming Social-Ecological Systems.” *Environmental Values*. 27 (5): 513–533, 2018.
10. For a fulsome account of “Land Back” including reflections and guidelines pertaining to the return of jurisdiction over territories to Indigenous peoples, please see *Land Back: A Yellowhead Institute Red Paper* (Toronto, Yellowhead Institute, 2019). Available at: <https://redpaper.yellowheadinstitute.org/>
11. The Cost of War Project at Brown University offers a comprehensive account of the relationship between the US military and fossil fuel consumption, as well as related questions about environmental pollution due to militarization.

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