
CHAPTER 2

Decolonizing Development in Diné Bikeyah

Resource Extraction, Anti-Capitalism, and Relational Futures

Melanie K. Yazzie

Development, Decolonization, and National Liberation

With this article, I hope to make a significant contribution both to the traditions of Diné resistance that seek to carry Diné life into the future and to the careful scholarly work that has been produced about this resistance in the fields of anthropology and history.¹ I draw from the methods of Native American studies, an intellectual and political project that coalesced in the late 1960s at a time when Diné land defenders were also beginning to organize large-scale resistance to resource extraction. Native American studies is a diverse and prolific field that belongs to a much longer American Indian intellectual tradition with roots at the turn of the twentieth century, when Native thinkers like Sarah Winnemucca, Zitkála-Šá, Luther Standing Bear, and Charles Eastman began to formulate political, literary, and historical frameworks to capture and contest the new reality of permanent settler invasion that Native nations were confronting following the end of the nineteenth-century Indian Wars (Estes forthcoming; Warrior 1995). This tradition has maintained a persistent interest in generating research to challenge the waves of settler colonial dispossession and elimination that structure US-Indigenous relations (see Dunbar-Ortiz 2015).²

Paralleling the emergence of tribal self-determination within US legal history—a development that spelled the apparent end to federal termination policy—the institutionalization of Native American studies as an academic discipline in the early 1970s crystallized a resurgent conversation about Indian self-determination at a time when national

self-determination was captivating scholars and leaders across many parts of the newly decolonized Third World. Scholars turned their attention to researching and promoting self-determination, and historical actors like Diné activists and tribal politicians who were facing unprecedented incursion into Navajo lands from uranium and coal mining corporations were also drawn into this discourse. The anthropological and historical literature on Diné resistance has framed the emergence of this resistance in the 1970s in part through the lens of colonialism, self-determination, and decolonization. In his work on energy development, urban growth, and resource extraction in the postwar Southwestern United States, the award-winning historian Andrew Needham (2014) argues that competing definitions of Navajo nationalism in this era used the language of colonialism and decolonization to articulate their different approaches to the pressing concern of Navajo development. These political debates within the Navajo context reflected midcentury decolonization movements in the Third World that sought to articulate newly won national self-determination through the vehicle of economic independence at a time when the idea of “development” was also entering the political imaginaries of First World nations as a way to deal with newly independent, but apparently “underdeveloped,” Third World nations (Needham 2010; Powell 2017). Peter MacDonald’s ascendance to power as the famed Diné leader who developed a robust version of “decolonized” Navajo nationalism throughout the 1970s and 1980s by merging economic and political independence with extractive practices speaks to this convergence of international trends in decolonization and Navajo political history during this time.

However, Needham himself points out that this type of decolonization was precarious, for once “capital was fixed in place” through the infrastructure of energy development, “the possibility for systemic change faced significant limits” (2014: 17). In an article titled “The Role of Policy in American Indian Mineral Development,” the economist Lorraine Turner Ruffing makes a similar claim. Seeking to identify the “causes of reservation underdevelopment,” Ruffing concludes that the “single most important factor” in underdevelopment is the inability of tribes like the Navajo Nation to take control of energy production through nationalization (1980: 41, 47). Using a comparative framework in which she examines the relative bargaining power of Third World nations and tribal nations within the United States over their respective mineral wealth, Ruffing shows that nationalization in Third World countries creates more optimal conditions for control. Over time, she argues, transnational energy corporations lose their relative bargaining power after settling mineral leases with the governments of those countries. Conversely, for US-based tribal nations like the Navajo Nation, transnational energy corporations gain relative bargaining power after settling mineral leases with tribes, while tribal bargaining power decreases over time (45–47). Seeing bargaining power as evidence of control, she proposes that tribes articulate a form of sovereignty over natural resources that would allow them to have “complete control over these resources” by “retaining complete ownership over mineral wealth” (54).

Ruffing’s article appeared in a 1980 publication called *American Indian Energy Resources and Development*, the second in a series of widely cited studies on tribal economic development published by the Native American Studies program at the University of New Mexico. Situated near the eastern edge of the Navajo Nation, the program had close relationships with tribal leaders in the region, such as MacDonald, who by 1980 was in his tenth year as the Navajo Nation president and a powerful player in the newly formed Council of Energy Resource Tribes, which a 3 September 1979 article in *People* magazine claimed might have “the power to become a domestic OPEC” (Demaret 1979). It is thus no surprise that the historical, political, and material changes forming at the crossroads of Indigenous political and intellectual production in the region were deeply engaged with larger global discourses about energy development and underdevelopment, Third World politics, decolonization, and national liberation and self-determination.

I offer this brief historical sketch to make a larger point about decolonization and development. I put Needham's historical reflections on this period into conversation with Ruffing's historically situated deployment of these categories to situate decolonization within a contemporary Native American studies perspective on capitalism and settler colonialism that does not reproduce the conceptual bind of development/decolonization that emerged in the era in which Ruffing writes. Indeed, Needham implies that Navajo decolonization qua nationalism in the 1970s was effectually impossible once the "unequal regional connections" between the peripheral Navajo Nation and the metropolitan center of Phoenix became permanent (2014: 8). As Marxist scholars have pointed out for generations, this inequality is a structural feature of capitalism, which requires the reproduction of violent relations of domination and exploitation in order to facilitate the accumulation and concentration of profit in the hands of a small ruling class at the expense of a mass class of racialized and colonized poor (Wainwright 2008; White 1983). In the context of Navajo political and economic history, the inequalities inherent to capitalism have been explored by Marxist scholars through the discourse of development (and underdevelopment) and related concepts of core-periphery dependency like the one deployed by Needham above (Curley 2017; Needham 2014; White 1983). This framing of capitalism has become largely naturalized in scholarly writings about the Navajo context, so much so that the "perennial question of development" is the discursive terrain through which diverse social actors (and scholars) who are engaged in struggles over energy in the Navajo Nation have forged political and symbolic meaning about questions of identity, governance, temporality, ontology, and knowledge itself (Powell and Curley 2009: 110).

Yet, despite this prolific attention to development, the capitalist (and colonial and imperial) underpinnings of development seem to still fade into the background of these scholarly works in which development becomes the unquestioned fulcrum for understanding a whole range of Diné materialities and histories. Following Joel Wainwright, I suggest that we need to put the capitalism (and colonialism and imperialism) back into development. As Wainwright points out, development "emerged as a global alibi for the imperial extension of specifically Western modes of economy, spatiality and being. This event occurred when European colonial practices called for capitalism to take up its ontological attachment with development—essentially soliciting capitalism to become development" (2008: 13). This discursive convergence of capitalism with development occurred in the same postwar period when competing definitions of Navajo nationalism were emerging in conversation with Third World national liberation movements under the banner of "decolonization." Although development as a concept is a rather old "form of power" that precedes and exceeds the advent and reach of capital, in the postwar period it "became the central mission or justification for Third World states" to the extent that it was "universally taken up . . . to define and organize the nation-state-capital triad everywhere" (4, 12).

Needham, Powell, and Curley point out that the multiple political formations—including Diné resistance struggles—that were actively cohering during this period of Navajo history gained legibility primarily through the discourse and ontology of development. As a new universal, development achieved hegemonic status. Like other colonized nations, the Navajo Nation was incorporated into this hegemony of development, and the historical record that scholars of Navajo energy politics draw from demonstrates this quite unequivocally. But the point that Wainwright urges us to recognize is that this hegemonic incorporation was not actually about development (neither, I would add, were nascent forms of decolonization about development). Wainwright reminds us that the purpose and effect of the epistemic merging of capitalism with development—what he calls "the sublime absorption of capitalism into the concept of development"—was to extend capitalist social relations through the practice of development (12). In other words, capitalism—not development—

was the structure of power at work in these multiple political formations. Hegemony, after all, describes the means by which capitalist social relations come to govern life. As a hegemonic formation, development became a powerful new way to shape Diné life toward the interests of capital (112).

The Priority of Anti-Capitalist Decolonization

As capitalism went to work through development, the emergent forms of decolonization that became equated with development integrated capitalism into the political mechanics of national and economic independence. This development-capitalism-decolonization triad has had devastating consequences for the Diné. Because capitalism as a structure of power has been neither dismantled nor fully interrogated by scholars and political actors, inequality and exploitation still dominate collective Navajo political horizons. And contemporary notions of Navajo self-determination, nationalism, and decolonization, which still seek sovereignty and national control through aspirations for development, continue to normalize what Needham calls “unequal geographies” of capitalist social relations “fixed in space” (2014: 245; Wainwright 2008: 8).³

Given the violence that structures and animates capitalist social relations, it is puzzling why certain scholars working at the burgeoning interdisciplinary crossroads of energy humanities, geology, and anthropology are so unclear about capitalism.⁴ Certainly, capitalism is directly addressed in this literature, where it looms large in all discussions about resource extraction, Indigenous social movements, (neo)liberalism, environmentalism, globalization, and alternative futures.⁵ However, there seems to be a separation between analytical interest and ethical-political commitments in these works. This is a sticking point where I think a differential Native American studies approach to decolonization matters, especially regarding Diné resistance. Most scholarship on Diné resistance rightfully contextualizes its history in the complex materialities conditioned by resource extraction. This scholarship mobilizes the language of social actors to develop neologisms and heuristics like “Navajo environmentalism,” “energy development,” “landscapes of power,” “Navajo nationalism,” “alternative energy,” “transition,” “energy politics,” “dependency,” “grassroots,” and “decolonization” to flesh out the dynamic and contested character of twentieth-century Diné politics (Curley 2017).

Within most of this literature, however, the language of anti-capitalist politics is either viewed with cool distance or rendered as only one vector that vies for dominance within a cacophony of discursive approaches and possibilities. At other times, anti-capitalist stances are dismissed or absent from the historical and ethnographic record altogether. Needham (2010, 2014) highlights how the Navajo nationalism of Diné youth activists during the 1970s drew from the same anticolonial and oppositional discourse (albeit with very different goals) that energized MacDonald’s version of Navajo nationalism. But he does not frame the politics of these activists as anti-capitalist. Instead, he argues, youth activists demanded an anticolonial nationalism of “nondevelopment,” which they saw as the only mechanism for preserving “supposedly transcendent” Navajo cultural and traditional values from destruction and “ruin”—in other words, death—by the colonial force of resource extraction (2010: 217, 222).⁶ By reading the anticolonial politics of these “youth activists” primarily through their rhetorical usage of “culture” and “tradition,” Needham implies that their strident advocacy for nondevelopment was a form of politically motivated instrumentalism in which the preservation of tradition and culture formed the basis for advancing a political agenda opposed to MacDonald’s.

Nowhere, to my knowledge, does Needham frame the politics of Diné resistance during this period as anti-capitalist, and nowhere is development critiqued beyond the categories of colonialism, tradition, and nationalism. Is this because these youth activists were not engaged with Marxist or other anti-capitalist politics? Perhaps. But I argue that the critique of death, which Needham misinterprets as an instrumentalist use of cultural preservation by youth activists to frame their differential anticolonial nationalism, actually demonstrates an embodied and experiential critique of capitalism. While they may not have framed it in these terms, these Diné land defenders knew that development was just another vehicle for violence and destruction operating under the false pretense of a “gift,” which is how earlier forms of liberalism like democracy, progress, and growth were packaged for Native people (Jennifer Nez Denetdale, pers. comm., 2016). Their critique thus formed the fertile discursive grounds for a politics of refusal that clearly recognized the material inequalities, exploitation, and death inherent to a capitalist project masquerading as development (Simpson 2014). They rightfully and courageously refused to further naturalize the death drive of capitalism in Diné life by rejecting development and devising a variety of political and physical strategies to reinforce this opposition.

I will go into more detail about the specific dimensions of this opposition in my discussion of the work produced by John Redhouse, who was a key figure in Diné resistance struggles throughout the 1970s and 1980s. I would, however, like to turn first to the Diné land defenders of Redhouse’s generation who, in addition to their keen understanding of capitalism, had a clear, transparent analysis of colonialism, a fact that Needham details quite extensively in his treatment of these struggles in *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest*. In her economic study of Navajo underdevelopment, Ruffing (1980) also highlights colonialism as a factor that is affecting the ability of tribes to nationalize their mineral wealth and enforce sovereignty. Although Ruffing blames the lack of tribal control over mineral wealth on a lack of sovereignty and autonomy—a causal link that leads to her call for mechanisms to increase tribal sovereignty in her closing section on recommendations for tribal policies regarding energy development—she does not explain *why* tribal sovereignty and autonomy are perennially disempowered in the first place. The Marxist critiques of capitalism that I outlined earlier would certainly point to capitalist infrastructures like energy exploitation as the main cause for the general lack of tribal sovereignty and autonomy. Such infrastructures create and require unequal geographies characterized by uneven distribution. Harm, exploitation, and underdevelopment are distributed to tribal nations where resources are extracted, while benefits, power, and development are distributed to metropolitan centers like Phoenix where resources are converted for energy, as well as to the multinational corporations that dictate industry operations (Voyles 2015). The term “resource colonialism” emerged from this context to understand Navajo sovereignty as overdetermined by these relations of unequal development and distribution, which have made Navajo sovereignty almost permanently dependent on a resource economy based on exploitation (Curley 2017).

However, what Marxist frameworks do not account for is another kind of colonialism: settler colonialism. I take Ruffing’s conclusions about lack of tribal national control over political and economic destiny as evidence of social relations conditioned by both capitalism and settler colonialism. Indeed, the reason why decolonized Third World nations are more successful in exerting control over their mineral wealth against transnational energy corporations is because they have sovereignty that is more difficult to usurp because formal decolonization has taken place.⁷ However, in the context of the United States, tribal nations have not achieved national liberation from colonial and imperial control by their occupying force and are therefore still colonized. As such, tribal nations like the Navajo

Nation cannot, ipso facto, be deemed “decolonized” (Cook-Lynn 2012). Indeed, the doctrine of congressional plenary power, even when not enforced as an unlimited and absolute power, vests the United States with total and final discretion to exercise jurisdiction over Native people and lands at any time (Cook-Lynn 2012; Wilkins and Stark 2011). Scholars have for decades dissected the manifold technologies by which the US nation-state has, throughout its entire history, labored to deny, defer, diminish, and outright terminate tribal sovereignty (Cook-Lynn 2012; Dunbar-Ortiz 2015). This has included the use of law, economic logics like development, popular culture, and academic knowledge to eliminate the prior political and territorial claims of Native nations that challenge US supremacy in these lands. Combined with the fact that US nationalism embraces capitalist accumulation as one of its primary expressions, US dominion over tribal destinies means that both capitalism and settler colonialism render the actual independence of the Navajo Nation all but impossible.

Because of the fundamental negation of tribal sovereignty that these two systems of power require, it is important for scholars to address both systems—in a transparent, direct, and critical manner—when analyzing and researching Indigenous politics. Moreover, the significant conceptual and material differences between resource colonialism and settler colonialism demonstrate the need for scholars to pay closer attention to the ways in which development operates as a modality of capitalism *and* settler colonialism, and to attend to the complex and interlocking relationalities that exist between different forms of resource colonialism, capitalism, and settler colonialism that are at work in any given historical or material context. I find Curley’s work to be an important step in this direction. In this work, he (2016, 2017a, 2017b) critiques Navajo political actors, including tribal politicians, nonprofits, and grassroots activists, for reproducing liberal and capitalist logics of development in their advocacy for the Navajo Nation to begin a “green transition” toward alternative energy development.⁸

What is at stake in this shift within the academic literature is actual, achievable Indigenous self-determination, which has been the centerpiece of American Indian intellectual traditions, including Native American studies, since their inception. Because of the entrenched inequalities and violences created by resource and settler colonialism—something that I imagine none of the scholars who write about Diné energy politics would contest—Diné self-determination would effectively require the demise of both the United States and of global capitalism for national liberation to be possible. And because of the hegemonic status that development holds within Diné life, it seems like a good starting point is for Diné people to reject current logics of development, thereby “awakening from the slumber of hegemony” and denaturalizing the ontological hold of development in everyday life and politics (Smith 2012: 211). This rejection would facilitate and foster a larger movement that could succeed at decolonization for Diné and, indeed, for all life. This vision of decolonization, premised as it is on a politics of Diné life in its entirety, is the focus on the next section of this article.

However, there are challenges. As I noted earlier, current scholars treat anti-capitalist positions with cool distance, ambivalence, and even dismissal. Colleen O’Neill, a labor historian who has also written widely about Navajo development, has claimed that calling for a “ban” on energy development (meaning, taking a nondevelopment or anti-capitalist stance) is a “trap” that pits Navajo environmentalists against labor activists (2010: 141). As Powell and Curley (2009) point out, it is certainly true that differential perspectives on development form the discursive nexus of conflict, possibility, ontology, and knowledge within the context of Diné politics. But claiming that nondevelopment is a “trap,” or advocating for “profit-seeking ventures” like Dana Powell and Dáilan J. Long do in their discussion of Navajo renewable energy activism, minimizes not only the structural violence that creates

these conditions in the first place, but also the traditions of anti-capitalist decolonization that have played a prominent role in Diné resistance since the incorporation of Diné life into capitalism and settler colonialism began (2010: 254).

Indeed, this anti-capitalist decolonization is alive and strong in current Diné resistance struggles, as well as in American Indian intellectual traditions and Indigenous political imaginaries more broadly.⁹ Scholars of these struggles must take the oppositional politics of anti-capitalist decolonization seriously, not just for how they shape histories of power and struggle, but also for the alternative futures they envision and demand. This is where a Native American studies project of decolonization is not only useful but necessary for envisioning an Indigenous politics of engagement and futurity. Like Diné anti-capitalists, Native American studies scholars have historically been dismissed by scholars and politicians for being too essentialist, totalizing, or polemical in their refusals and rejections of settler colonial domination over Indigenous lives and lands. I encourage the knowledge producers, decision makers, and historical actors invested in Diné futures to set these misconceptions aside and join in the project of anti-capitalist decolonization, one that accepts nothing less than conditions of vibrant futurity in which life in its entirety is able to thrive free from the violence of empire. Indeed, I hope to have shown that these futures require imagination and sweeping vision. Our decolonial aspirations are not just about sovereignty and exerting independence over energy development; they are about challenging the very capitalist notion of development that works in tandem with the structure of settler colonialism to reproduce and secure Diné death. Our politics of anti-capitalist decolonization must thus not only act as a form of resistance to the death drive of capitalism and settler colonialism, but also function as a vehicle for imagining a politics of life that will refuse death and instead secure a future for all our relations.

Toward a Diné Politics of Life

As I have argued elsewhere, struggles over life and death continue to shape the persistent refusal on the part of Diné grassroots people to acknowledge and accept the violence of liberal development ideologies (Yazzie 2016). However, this differential politics of life has its roots in earlier periods of Diné history. As Peter Iverson notes, for Diné people, “the sweeping program of livestock reduction [in the 1930s] caused massive trauma within the Navajo world” (2002: 137). Marilyn Help, a Diné elder, expanded on this claim in a 2001 interview with Iverson:

I think my people really got hurt by the livestock reduction program because they are really close to their animals. . . . Our people cried. My people, they cried. They thought this act was another Hwééldi, Long Walk. They asked the government, “Why are you doing this to us. . . . You gave the animals for us to use, and now you are turning around and killing our livestock.

Another Diné woman relayed the story of her husband’s death, which she directly linked to livestock reduction:

My husband said, “You people are . . . heartless. You have now killed me. You have cut off my arms. You have cut off my legs. You have taken my head off. There is nothing left for me.” It wasn’t long before my husband fell ill . . . and at the beginning of spring he died.” (quoted in Iverson 2002: 137)

These words, from the mouths of Diné women who remembered the impact of livestock reduction on their everyday lives, tell a story of death and catastrophe that stands in stark

contrast to the story of life and triumph proffered by the prevailing discourse of progress that dominated the liberalism of that era.

Indeed, for Diné people, livestock reduction did not represent a failure to take their cultural views seriously. This view was extended by John Collier, the main architect of livestock reduction, to explain widespread Navajo discontent with the program (Yazzie 2016). Rather, they viewed it as an assault on their entire way of life, which had happened previously when the Long Walk of the Navajo, or Hwéeldi, had threatened the total elimination of Diné life.¹⁰ It is therefore from Diné people themselves, both those in the 1960s and 1970s who define themselves as activists, and community members like Marilyn Help who have interpreted livestock reduction from within an ordinary politics of Diné life, that I draw my argument regarding the politics of death underwriting the increased normalization of liberal modalities in everyday Diné life and governance. Moreover, I argue that the salience of this politics of death across various periods of Diné history spanning from Hwéeldi to what John Redhouse has termed the “dark period of the fossil fuel age” of the 1960s and 1970s helps to explain the comprehensive discourses of life that have served as the centerpiece of various iterations of grassroots Diné political action since the 1930s (2014: 83).

Through his voluminous research in the 1970s and 1980s, Redhouse uncovered a vast network of connections between multinational resource extraction corporations, tribal governments, US politicians, and other actors that extended through and beyond tribal lands and boundaries. He concluded that the extraction of resources on Navajoland was linked to a larger system of extraction, exploitation, and profiteering characterized by what he called “a grand plan” for the colonization of Navajos (2014: 82). He frequently employed this framework in his writings to trace connections between different forms of violence in locations like Black Mesa, Farmington, and Gallup, where the logic of extraction had transformed everyday social relations into a war over life and death. In Redhouse’s mind, what was occurring through murderous violence and racism in industry-driven border towns had everything to do with the extraction of life happening through mining, forced removal, and disease in rural parts of the Navajo reservation where industry operations had also set up shop. Both locations were geopolitical coordinates connected through an economic network of extractive practices that were destroying the land, killing sheep, killing people, uprooting families from their homes, and alienating people from their entire way of life. Pauline Whitesinger, a Big Mountain matriarch who was prominent in the struggle on Black Mesa to resist forced relocation in the 1970s and 1980s, likened this network of extractive practices to “putting your hand down someone’s throat and squeezing the heart out” (2011: 75). In a particularly striking passage from his self-published memoir *Getting It Out of My System*, Redhouse describes this economic network and the visceral and violent terms of death that extractive economic practices were imposing on the Diné, even as tribal politicians increasingly opened up Diné lands and bodies to service economic deals with resource extraction corporations:

I grew up in Farmington in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a typical bordertown, racist as hell. . . . There were the usual local rednecks. . . . They didn’t like Indians but they liked our money. . . . And then came the boomers, the white oilfield trash from Texas and Oklahoma, who were as dangerous as they looked. They hated Blacks in TX and OK but since there were very few Negroes and a whole lot of Indians in the new Energy Capital of the West, we, the local Indians, became their [target]. The energy boom of the 50s and 60s brought the boomers and that’s when Indian killing became a regular sport in Farmington. They would kill you just because you were Indian. So [we] grew up fighting during that particularly violent period. We had to fight back to survive . . . and while we were fighting for our lives, we realized the supreme irony that most of the energy that made Farmington a boomtown came from the nearby . . . Indian reservations. And

that much of the water in the rivers which flowed through our tribal lands were used for regional energy development which benefited not only the area boomers but large off-reservation, non-Indian populations in big cities. . . . Oh my god, we were a colony, an exploited energy and water resource colony of the master race. The colonialism was by design. The exploitation was part of a grand plan. And we in the bordertown ghettos were fighting the sons of the colonizers and exploiters who had set up shop and were running their resource raids out of Farmington. We the indigenous people of this land were being screwed—coming and going (2014: 82).

In this lengthy passage, Redhouse draws material connections between the violent culture of Indian killing in border towns like Farmington and the resource raids like coal and uranium mining occurring in other parts of the Navajo Nation, the profits of which literally fed border town economies and thus directly fueled Indian killing. For Redhouse (1985), extractive practices trafficked in Indian killing on multiple levels, including murder, harassment, exploitation, the plunder of water, and, as he would later argue, forced relocation and the rape of land.

Redhouse frames the multiple modalities of death and violence at the heart of extraction in a strikingly similar way to Indigenous feminists writing about extraction more than 30 years later. In partnership with the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), the Women's Earth Alliance (WEA) released a report that documents what it calls environmental violence. Environmental violence entails "the disproportionate and often devastating impacts that the conscious and deliberate proliferation of environmental toxins and industrial development (including extraction, production, export and release) have on Indigenous women, children and future generations, without regard from States or corporations for their severe and ongoing harm" (WEA and NYSHN 2016: 15). The report cites more than a dozen Indigenous feminist land defenders who draw from their autobiographical experiences as Indigenous women, as well as their activism and advocacy regarding sexual violence and resource extraction, to argue that resource extraction is fundamentally violent. These Indigenous feminist land defenders also point out that the violence of resource extraction affects not only the lands that are plundered and pillaged during resource raids (to borrow Redhouse's term), but also the bodies of Indigenous people—and women, youth, and LGBTQ relatives in particular. This land/body relationality is bound by and through an intergenerational toxicity caused by industrial pollution, often as a result of resource extraction. The land/body relationality that these Indigenous feminist land defenders uncover as central to environmental violence echoes the connections between Indian killing and resource raids, which occur at the respective sites of body and land, that Redhouse draws from his own frontline experience as a Diné land defender in the 1970s and 1980s. The structural portrait that Redhouse, WEA, and NYSHN paint is one of violence and death.

In addition to having roots in Marxist critiques of capitalism, my critique of the violence that underpins development comes directly from Indigenous feminist and Diné land defenders who draw connections between the everyday lived material realities of environmental violence and larger structures of colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. These connections are key for understanding the politics of life espoused by Big Mountain matriarchs like Whitesinger and Ruth Benally that emerged to contest these material realities of environmental violence and death masquerading as liberal promises of development, life, and growth.¹¹ The Guatemalan activist Sandra Moran provides a framework that is useful for interpreting this politics. She writes, "Women resist because they defend life. The extractive model kills life, impedes it, transforms it. The defense of life is in the center of resistance and as women we have always been at the center of taking care of life" (quoted in WEA and NYSHN 2014: 12). In the following passage, Benally suggests something similar

when she claims that the Diné have a right to live freely on the land in Big Mountain and other parts of Black Mesa because they have a deep relationship with the land, one that infuses their sense of self and their entire understanding of reality:

Náaná dibédó' dooda danihijiní nidi nihí éi dibéhígí t'áá deiyínít'a' . . . T'áá niléi háádéé' shíí t'áá éi téi bee hiniináá lágo baa ákódaniidzjí. Dáák'eh dó. Éi nanise' niljnígí naadáá niljínii t'óó ahayóigóó choo'í bi tadidíin hóló. Éi hostóí nahalái yee nahalá. Éi biniinaago éiyá doo beediyii'nahda nihi dáák'eh naaznilóó. Yéego éi nihik'éi át'éego éi baa nitsídikees nihikéyahígí. Háalá éi bikáá' neidái. Biniinaa áádoo át'éhígóó "Dooda" nihí'dínínígí éi doo ákwíiniidzinda. Doo hak'ého la' ániit'éedadoo niidzin (2011: 54, 58).¹²

Roman Bitsuie and Kenja Hassan echo this understanding:

Navajos' obligations to the earth, to their family, and community is their purpose in life. All of these things that are important to them spiral back to the land itself. The land is the center of their orientation in experience and the base of their sense of reality and identity, to separate them from it would cause them to lose contact with all that is sacred and holy to them. To force people to live such a life of meaninglessness is . . . a condemnation to a slow death. (2011: 94).

As these two passages imply, the land-based paradigm that emerged from the context of these women's resistance to forced removal had, at its center, both an unwavering critique of the almost totalizing death that extractive practices represented to Diné worldviews and a framework for Diné conceptions of life rooted in one's relationship with the land and responsibilities to life-giving forces and beings like sheep, corn, family, and holy beings. As Benally points out, this relationality comprises the Diné worldview and orients an ontology that exists always in relation to or in kinship with an entire web of relations that have specific connections to specific places. In other words, through the act of resisting forced removal, these women enacted a politics of life that was both defensive (as in to defend life against the destruction of extraction) and generative (as in to caretake life through an ethos and practice of kinship obligation).

This dual move of defending and caretaking relational life is at the heart of the Diné concept of *k'é*, which is still widely practiced as a social and ontological custom in both Diné resistance struggles and in everyday Diné life. I argue that his turn toward life has energized and shaped the now-popular phrases "Mni Wiconi" and "Tó Éí Iná At'é," or "Water Is Life," that have become a signature for Indigenous struggles like the stunning effort to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock and the lesser-known but momentous Nihigaal Bee Iná effort, which was a walk across the Navajo Nation led by Diné women and youth in 2015 "to document both the beauty of land and people and how this is being desecrated by resource extraction" (IAM 2015). As it has been invoked within Indigenous resistance struggles, "Water Is Life" represents a set of assumptions and values that represent a radical departure from those that drive liberal determinations of life that have actually brought harm and death to the Diné and other Indigenous peoples (Yazzie and Baldy forthcoming). These assumptions and values are premised on an embracement of relationality in which the responsibility of being a good relative to all of one's relatives, including other-than-human relatives like land, plants, water, animals, and ancestors, becomes the priority and basis for political organization and action.

Like WEA and NYSHN, Indigenous women and those who are writing and organizing within the framework of Indigenous feminism have articulated the most comprehensive theory of this relationality. Winona LaDuke, for example, has argued that "Native American teachings describe the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas. Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across

generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together” (1999: 2). And Indigenous feminists like Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2002) and Mishuana Goeman (2017: 101) have long emphasized that Indigenous feminist praxis offers a “scale based on connection” that collapses “the settler scale that separates humans, lands, animals.”¹³ These Indigenous feminists articulate a theory of connection in which relationality and movement define ontology rather than the bounded individualism that functions as the organizing principle for (violent) liberal, capitalist, and settler colonial modalities of time and space.

In his edited volume *Bitter Water: Diné Oral Histories of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute*, Malcolm Benally documents oral histories of resistance relayed by Big Mountain matriarchs, including the two I quoted earlier, Ruth Benally and Pauline Whitesinger. *Bitter Water* includes a chapter entitled “Sheep Is Life” (or Dibé Bee Iiná) in which editor Benally weaves together these women’s definitions of the phrase “Sheep Is Life” (2011: 62–84). Like the values underlying the phrase “Water Is Life,” “Sheep Is Life” offers a similar theory of politics premised on a definition of life rooted in a philosophy and practice of relationality. Donna Haraway, who writes about human-sheep relationality on Black Mesa, argues that the interconnection between Diné women and sheep offers fertile ground for “cultivating a multispecies justice” (2016: 3). Notions like “Sheep Is Life” demonstrate what Haraway calls a “symposis,” or the “making-with” that characterizes the “complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems” of kinship and materiality (58). The question of justice, what some who write and organize about resource extraction call “alternative futures,” has been a central concern of the post-humanist ethics that Haraway has contributed to academic knowledge about relationality (Jalbert et al. 2017). As one of the primary scholarly threads feeding the emerging project of energy humanities, post-humanism urges scholars and historical actors to develop theories and methods that address the “necessity of constituting new worldviews and modes of action appropriate to the recognition of ecological interdependency and interresponsibility” (Boyer 2017: 191). Although it is important to point out that neither Haraway nor any scholar working in post-humanist traditions is offering any new insight into relationality that has not already been expertly theorized and practiced by Diné and other Indigenous peoples since before the advent of American academic institutions, I see the work emerging from the interdisciplinary crossroads of energy humanities, post-humanism, queer affect, and Indigenous feminism as a sign that intellectuals writing from both the front lines of Indigenous resistance and academic positions are formulating a politics of relational life that can serve as a form of multispecies justice, which Whitesinger, Benally, Goeman, Moreton-Robinson, LaDuke, Redhouse, Haraway, and Mohan all point to as a critical and necessary framework for liberating all life from the death grip of the hegemonic formation of “extractivism” and its liberal, capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and settler colonial valance of development (Jalbert et al. 2017b: 6).¹⁴

■ **MELANIE K. YAZZIE** is a citizen of the Navajo Nation and the 2018–2019 Katrin H. Lamon Fellow at the School for Advanced Research. In 2019 she will begin a joint appointment at the University of New Mexico (UNM) as Assistant Professor of Native American Studies and American Studies. She holds a PhD in American Studies from UNM. She specializes in Diné (Navajo) studies, Indigenous feminist and queer studies, American Indian history, social and political theory, and critical environmental studies. She organizes with The Red Nation, a grassroots organization advocating the liberation of Native people from colonialism and capitalism. Email: melanie.yazzie@gmail.com

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive literature review of this literature, see Curley (2017a); Sherry (2002).
2. For an introduction to decolonization in the field of Native American and Indigenous studies, see Riding In and Miller (2011). See also L. T. Smith (2012) and the various articles and blog posts published in the open access journal *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*. For a foundational treatment of settler colonialism, see Wolfe (2006).
3. Andrew Curley (2017a, 2018) has recently published two excellent critiques of development within the context of Navajo energy politics. These are, to my knowledge, the only critical scholarly works about this topic that currently exist. Another study that examines development in relation to capitalism in the Navajo context focuses on the period that directly precedes the energy boom of the 1970s is Weiss (1984).
4. In a piece published just last year, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2017) claims that the scientific revelation of the Anthropocene challenges received scholarly wisdom that capitalism is the sole (or primary) culprit of global warming and catastrophic climate change.
5. Published in early 2017, the massive *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Szeman and Boyer 2017) provides a rich and diverse collection of scholars and approaches writing about this topic.
6. Most scholarship that details the harm inflicted on Diné people by resource extraction is about the destructive legacies of large-scale uranium mining on the Navajo Nation. There are several excellent studies about this that I draw from to frame my larger argument about the politics of death that liberal development qua resource extraction brought to Diné existence (see Brugge et al. 2006; Montoya 2016; Voyles 2015). I also draw from Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of "slow violence" to frame my discussion of the ontologies of death (and the political contestations that emerge from these ontologies) that are normalized through resource extraction.
7. Scholars of postcolonial studies have pointed out that coloniality is a persistent structure of power that continues to reproduce global relations of domination/oppression and wealth/disposability in decolonized contexts (what is more commonly known as the distinction between the Global North and the Global South), a point that cannot be glossed over (see Mignolo 2000). An excellent source that includes other important writers within the postcolonial tradition is Ashcroft et al. (2006).
8. Several examples of this kind of scholarship address capitalism, colonialism, and Indigenous politics outside of the Navajo context. In *Resource Rebels*, Al Gedicks (2002: 15) argues that Indigenous challenges to resource extraction in numerous locations around the globe have erupted in response to the restructuring of capitalism under neoliberalism (often called globalization), which created new "resource frontiers" for multinational corporations to exploit. Anna Tsing (2005: 11) also examines the relationship between Indigenous uprisings, environmentalism, and capitalism in *Friktion*, in which she argues that "the spread of capitalism has been violent, chaotic, and divisive, rather than smoothly all-encompassing," as scholars and advocates of globalization would like us to believe.
9. Current examples of Diné-led anti-capitalist decolonization struggles include the Taala Hooghan Infoshop in Flagstaff, Arizona; the K'é Infoshop in Window Rock, Arizona; and the Red Nation in Albuquerque and Gallup, New Mexico.
10. Indeed, the following statement made by Pauline Whitesinger in the late 1990s regarding the forced relocation of Diné families on Black Mesa provides a view of liberal development qua extraction as an assault on Navajos' entire way of life: "The reason we will not relocate is because the land has become a part of us. . . . We have to resist. We carry a béesh yistògi, an arrowhead, and a keet'áan yálti, a Talking Prayer bundle. And there are ways of life like Dibéshchíin: Sheep is life. There are many ceremonies that have a way of life. To leave the sacred mountains with these teachings would be a great loss. So we are speaking out. . . . This is how we think. This is why we did not sign our names. The sacred places are all we have" (2011: 47, 48, 50). In this passage, Whitesinger frames resistance to relocation as the defense of a sacred way of life—a way of understanding and being in the world—that is inextricably bound to land, sheep, and ceremony. Grassroots political actors have repeatedly articulated these themes of life—land, sheep, and ceremony—throughout Navajo history to characterize political engagements like resistance to forced relocation on Black Mesa. Phrases like "way of life," "lifeways," "sheep is life," and "water

is life,” all of which are commonly used by Diné people when speaking of the meaning and importance of Diné approaches to existing in harmony with the land, are not, however, just cultural or epistemological phenomena. The concepts of “life” mobilized by interlocutors like Ruth Benally, Marilyn Help, Roberta Blackgoat, Mae Tso, and Pauline Whitesinger in the process of active resistance to liberal development agendas like resource extraction invoke a relationship with the world that is simultaneously cultural, spiritual, epistemological, and political. The historic circulation of these notions of life within the realm of political theater, which itself is a history that arose because of the stranglehold that ideologies of liberal development have come to exert on everyday Navajo life, makes them a form of politics preoccupied with the preservation of certain modes of Diné life and living in the face of violence and death.

11. The Diné sheepherding community of Big Mountain is located in the northern part of Navajo-Hopi partitioned land (also known as the Joint Use Area or Bennett Freeze) on Black Mesa, a large region within the Navajo Nation. Big Mountain is an internationally known geopolitical site of Indigenous struggle that has also been the beating heart of Diné resistance to forced relocation for more than 40 years. For more on resistance at Big Mountain, see Benally (2011); Brugge (1999); Florio and Mudd (1985); Redhouse (1985); Wilkinson (1999).
12. This passage is translated by Malcolm Benally in *Bitter Water* as: “The law says that sheep are not allowed here, but we hold on to them . . . We learned how to live by taking care of the livestock. It is like the cornfield. There are many ways to prepare corn and use the pollen. The pollen is used by healers in the Blessing Way ceremony. So that we never lose the memory of a cornfield we have a natural kinship that is woven into the land. It is how we walk on the land. That is why even when we are told, ‘No,’ we have to resist. We do not want to live in any other way.”
13. I also draw from Nick Estes’s (forthcoming) work on relationality.
14. Extractivism is the “ideological mindset” of “pillage” that underlies the actual removal of resources for capitalist and imperialist interests (see Jalbert et al. 2017: 6).

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