
Introduction

Indigenous Resurgence, Decolonization, and Movements for Environmental Justice

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This volume of *Environment and Society* 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 anticolonial lens. Specifically, the writers for this volume 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.

■ **KEYWORDS:** climate change, environment, Indigenous, Indigenous knowledge, resistance, social movements

In multiple sites across the world, Indigenous peoples are leading political and social movements for environmental justice. In Indigenous North America, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe spearheaded the resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline and historic environmental damage to the Missouri River. 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 front lines of the latest forms of colonial devastation. These are only a few examples of the ways in which Indigenous peoples are challenging structures of contemporary global 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. 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.”¹ Notably, they are demanding that this movement be accountable, first and foremost, to the struggle for Native liberation.

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. Littered



throughout academic writing, climate justice protests, and climate science reports is 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 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 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 nuanced 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*—generated by the things that one does rather than something that one simply knows. She argues: “The “natural world,” “environment,” or “Creation” are essential parts of Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is not just “knowledge” per se. It is the lives lived by people and their particular relationship with Creation” (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 every day: 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. “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” (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 no 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 fueled by white settlers and “settlement.” Critical questions need to be asked: How are Indig-

enous political demands for decolonization taken up within the broader scope of impending planetary dystopia? How might “environmental justice” work to (re)inscribe hegemonies of settler colonial power by foregrounding settler interests? 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?”

To address these lines of inquiry, this volume of *Environment and Society* 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 anticolonial lens. Specifically, the writers for this volume 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 sociopolitical spaces and realities (ranging from site-specific resistance efforts to broader theoretical discussions) and thus carry significant import when translated to an anticolonial 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 issue opens with “Mino-Mnaamodzawin: Achieving Indigenous Environmental Justice in Canada,” 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-mnaamodzawin* (“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 Bideyah: 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 antidevelopment 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 article, “Unsettling the Land: Indigeneity, Ontology, and Hybridity in Settler Colonialism,” Paul Burnow, 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 long-standing 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, Settler 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, one dimension of how settler colonialism commits environmental injustice.

The volume 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, these articles offer 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. The time for colonial removal, as these authors collectively argue, is right now.

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NOTE

1. For an excellent synopsis of “mainstream environmentalism,” see West and Brockington (2012: 1–3).

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