

Indigenous-Led Environmental Action:

A Relational and Reciprocal Means for Environmental Protection and Indigenous Liberation.

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ABSTRACT: Environmental harm and environmental violence affect everyone, however, climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect Indigenous communities. More specifically, Indigenous women face the worst neglect and harm from environmental damage. To adequately address these harms, it is necessary to support Indigenous-led climate activism and community-based organizations and to platform for those who are affected most deeply. Structural violence did not end at colonialism and this paper explores the ways in which environmental violence and degradation represent an ongoing form and result of colonial and capitalist practices. This paper also explores how damage to the land results in damage to the people who rely on it. Environmental violence represents a manifestation of intersecting modes of oppression like colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, racism, and sexism; intersectional social movements are therefore necessary to adequately work against these intersecting oppressions.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Violence, Indigenous Activism, Colonial Violence, Environmental Justice, Intersectionality, Community-based Organization

Harm to the environment causes harm to the people. Everyone is affected by climate change and resource extraction; however, the impacts of environmental harm are most severe for Indigenous peoples due to their connection and relationship to land and water and “the proximity of their communities to resource developments” (Galloway 2021, 6). Beyond the disproportionate impact resource extraction has on Indigenous peoples, there is further undue impact on Indigenous women (Dennis and Bell 2020, 378). This is because of their multiple marginalized identities and experience of intersecting modes of oppression (Bacigal 2020). Since intersecting identities “such as gender, race, and class influence how people are uniquely situated in these struggles” (Harper et al. 2018, 190), it is necessary to center environmental justice around how these oppressed peoples experience and fight against environmental violence.

Environmental violence reflects an ongoing form of structural colonial violence against Indigenous peoples. With settler colonialism comes an “exploitation of the land” and “for settlers to usurp the land and extract its value, Indigenous peoples must be destroyed” (Spillett 2021, 13). As Bacigal puts it, “what happens to the land happens to the people,” thus, the destruction and “degradation of the land is viewed as ‘normal’” to ensure the economic prosperity of the settler state (2020); this, in turn, positions the destruction of Indigenous bodies and communities as an “‘acceptable risk’ – a necessary sacrifice” (Bacigal 2020). This system of destructive resource extraction and environmental violence thus “seeks to eliminate” Indigenous peoples to access “the lands and waters” (Bacigal 2020). Indigenous women have historically been protectors of “their families, communities, and lands,” and the intersecting violence against them has been a primary mode of disconnection between Indigenous peoples as communities, and Indigenous peoples and the land (Dennis and Bell 2020, 383). The “current environmental crises” illustrate Indigenous women’s vulnerability due to their intersecting “[marginalized] identities, but also Indigenous women’s leadership in resisting resource extraction and environmental degradation on their lands, as they have always done” (Dennis and Bell 2020, 378).

Environmental degradation and exploitation (and climate change as a consequence) affect everyone, however, environmental benefits and burdens are not distributed equally across society (Galloway 2021, 5). Hazardous waste facilities (Tsuji 2021, 1) and industrial developments “assimilate [...] Indigenous homelands into the colonial landscape through development,” and thus, “the colonizers are also assimilating the Indigenous people through environmental assimilation” (2). Indigenous women hold special “reciprocal relationships” with the land and the non-human world (Dennis and Bell 2020, 378). These reciprocal relationships and Indigenous women’s roles in society have been hindered by environmental violence and assimilation (Dennis and Bell 2020, 379). Traditional Indigenous cultural practices like “berry picking, collection of sweat rocks, and harvesting medicines” are not being conducted “because of fear of exposure to contaminants,” and so environmental degradation also “robs communities of intergenerational knowledge transmission” (Dennis and Bell 2020, 380).

There are evident connections “between the health and safety of the lands and the health and safety of Indigenous bodies” (Bacigal 2020). Cancers and illnesses that manifest from exposure to bioaccumulating environmental toxins can also produce congenital disorders and infertility (Bacigal 2020). However, unfortunately, and ironically, “Indigenous Peoples are among those least responsible for environmental degradation but are most often subjected to its fallout” (Bacigal 2020). “Indigenous trans, genderqueer, and Two-Spirit people, women, and girls are even more deeply affected by environmental violence” (Bacigal 2020). They have also traditionally had a more “intimate connection to the lands and waters,” and often were responsible for carrying out the next generation (Bacigal 2020). If the land is destroyed, the people living off of and with that land are destroyed; this fuels the colonial and capitalist goal of eliminating Indigenous peoples and their cultural practices for easier access to the land they want to exploit (Bacigal 2020).

Since Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, are most affected by environmental violence, it is essential to embody practices they value in our effort for environmental justice. Framing “and responding to violence” in a “relational and structural, holistic, sustainable, and locally owned” (Nagy 2022, 192) manner reflects a kind of “‘bottom-up’ pressure for transformation at the level of the state and institutions” (199). These “‘bottom-up’ civil society initiatives” (Nagy 2022, 195) oppose “top-down, western liberal approaches” (192) that do not reflect relational, reciprocal, and inclusionary practices that are so central to Indigenous peoples’ ways of life. In this way, environmental justice accounts for “the sharing [...] of environmental costs and benefits” that are associated with “environmental policy and natural resource development decisions, and the extent to which the decision-making has meaningfully included the participation of affected communities” (Tsuji 2021, 1). Furthermore, Indigenous women-led bottom-up approaches to environmental justice emphasize “the interconnectedness of people and their environments” and the limitations of the top-down approach, which reinforces a false idea of a division between humans and the ecosystems they depend on (Tsuji 2021, 1). To maintain healthy, reciprocal relationships between humans and the non-human world, we need to follow Indigenous “laws and codes of conduct” (Tsuji 2021, 2).

Indigenous women engaging in this bottom-up approach as leaders, teachers, and “transmitters of culture” (Harper et al. 2018, 195) can provide a framework for how we can and should engage with environmental justice. Indigenous women are most impacted by environmental violence and are also especially “mindful of respect and caring for the lands and waters” that provide for the “continued well-being of their communities” (Dennis and Bell 2020, 379); moreover, with new kinds of “environmental injustices,” their ability to engage with their roles as teachers and careers for the environment is threatened (Dennis and Bell 2020, 379). Both “women and nature are othered, exploited, and dominated,” and so a kind of bottom-up ecofeminism reinforces that “no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (Spillett 2021, 18). This also represents an essential feature of land-based learning and knowledge that seeks to “interrupt the ways the Western gender binary,

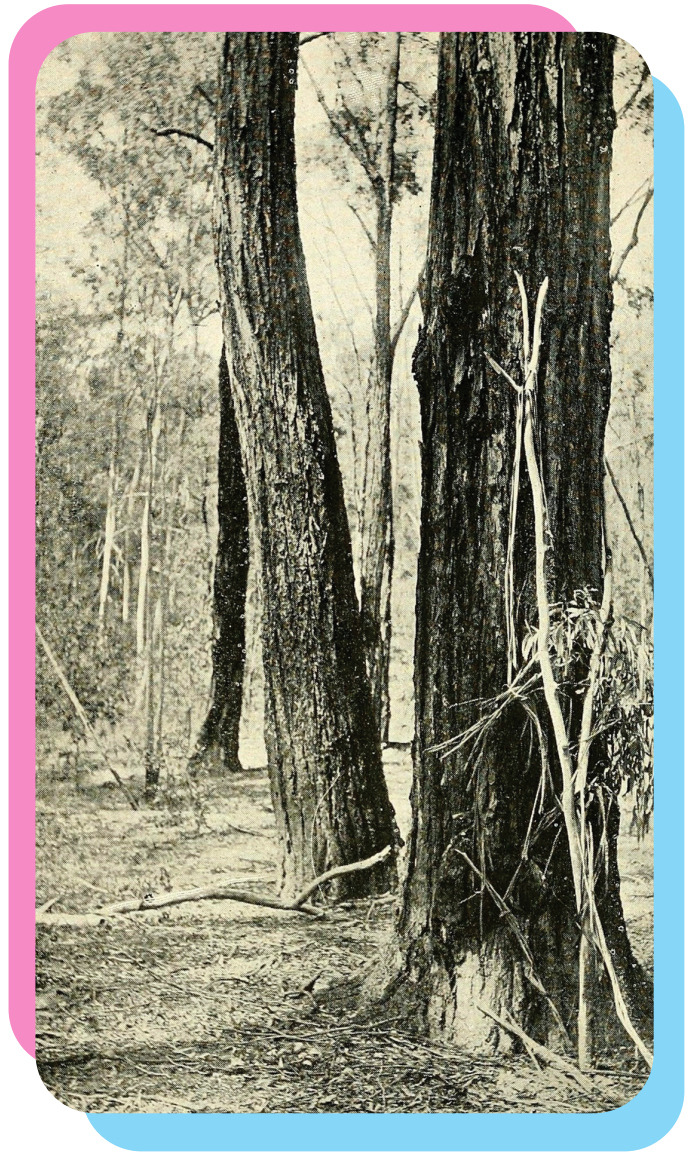
heteropatriarchy, and heteronormativity have operated as tools of colonial projects, fracturing relationships between humans and Land, and resulting in the erasure of land-based knowledge” (Spillett 2021, 24). Both Western top-down approaches to environmentalism and wrongful Western conceptualizations of a disconnect between humans and ecology perpetuate the idea that the land is “something to dominate” (Spillett 2021, 24). Bottom-up, community-based, and Indigenous women-led forms of environmentalism and resistance is also simultaneously “anti-capitalist and anti-imperial” and demands the “respect and protection” of “women’s bodies, but also of land, water, mother earth, culture, and community” (Bacigal 2020). Approaches to environmental justice and protection have to embody Indigenous peoples’ recognition of a relational exchange and set of reciprocal responsibilities to nature.

The Indigenous Environmental Network and Oil Change International collaborated in publishing a report called “Indigenous Resistance Against Carbon” (IRAC) that highlights the ways in which - and outcomes of - Indigenous peoples and their grassroots movements protecting and defending the environment (2021). These actions are bottom-up community-organized forms of action that “fight against neoliberal projects that seek to destroy our world via extraction” (IRAC 2021, 1). Environmental protection and liberation are cornerstones of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination interests and are “guided in principle by traditional Indigenous knowledge” (IRAC 2021, 2). “[These] principles determine how Indigenous Peoples act and relate to surrounding ecosystems and to other human beings, on a personal level and a collective nation-to-nation level” (IRAC 2021, 2). Fossil fuel extraction (and other kinds of resource extraction) directly harm “traditional Indigenous knowledge by seeking to untether spiritual ways, languages, cultural practices, legal systems, and social, economic, and legal systems from relationship with those lands and water” (IRAC 2021, 2). Indigenous women-led resistance movements are “effectively stopping or slowing local environmental destruction that threatens our whole planet” (Ramdas and Garcia 2021). There exists a “gross underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles at international and environmental organizations” and so transformative change has been made - and should continue to be made - through decolonial, community-led, bottom-up advocacy (Ramdas and Garcia 2021).

Engaging in Indigenous-led bottom-up modes of environmental protection and advocacy reflects a “move away from state-centered processes and discourse while also foregrounding structural injustices and the agency of marginalised groups” (Nagy 2022, 208). Bottom-up Indigenous “decolonial transformative justice incorporates grassroots acts of Indigenous resurgence and self-determination as well as the local unsettling of colonial relations through settler decolonisation and allyship” (Nagy 2022, 208). Centering Indigeneity in environmentalist action and discourses is necessary and “addresses the current needs of Indigenous peoples, follows the environmental leadership of Indigenous women, and actively supports Indigenous sovereignty as essential to climate justice” (Dennis and Bell 2020, 383). While environmental degradation and destruction (and consequently climate change) affects everyone, “Indigenous peoples, and women in particular, are affected disproportionately” (Dennis and Bell 2020, 383); gender-based environmental violence furthers colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist goals and perpetuates the domination and subjugation of Indigenous peoples (Bacigal 2020). To adequately combat these structures of domination, it is imperative that we look to and engage with bottom-up, community-based, Indigenous-led forms of resistance. Even beyond this, we must engage with Indigenous-led forms of resistance that account for the unique ways environmental degradation affects Indigenous women and other gender minorities.

Western, institutional, top-down approaches are inadequate and advance a belief that the land can be “owned, controlled, and sold,” which opposes Indigenous “responsibility-based [relationships]” that emphasize the relational and reciprocal care “for the land, sea, and the creatures within, respecting and nurturing the land as a living entity” (Williams 2021). Bottom-up approaches to environmentalism like those by Indigenous peoples “disrupt the goals of the world’s most powerful institutions — nation-states and multinational corporations” (IRAC 2021, 2). Movements “built upon an Indigenous Rights framework” also go beyond “the goals of environmental protection” and decolonize environmental action (IRAC 2021, 2). To adequately combat environmental violence that is often gendered, capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, and imperialist,

we must employ bottom-up Indigenous-led modes of environmental action; this ensures the representation of reciprocal and relational Indigenous values and knowledge while also guaranteeing the prioritization and valuing of Indigenous cultural and traditional practices. Decolonized Indigenous environmental action that comes from the community reinforces these traditional values, which ensure the longevity of Indigenous knowledge, the protection of the environment, the protection of Indigenous communities, the protection of Indigenous gender minorities, and ultimately the protection of us all.



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