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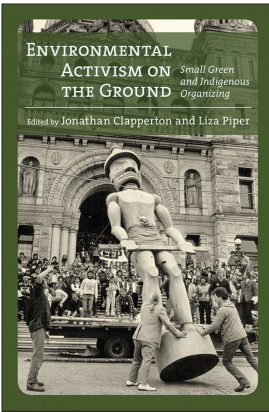
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**ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM ON THE GROUND:
Small Green and Indigenous Organizing**
Edited by Jonathan Clapperton and Liza Piper

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Native/Non-Native Alliances Challenging Fossil Fuel Industry Shipping at Pacific Northwest Ports

Zoltán Grossman

The natural resources we all depend upon must be protected for future generations . . . to bring us to a place where there is a quality of life, and where Indians and non-Indians are to understand one another and work together.

— Billy Frank Jr. (Nisqually), 1931–2014

Despite the enormous scale and reach of energy corporations, their top-heavy operations are actually quite vulnerable to social movements that creatively use spatial strategies and tactics.¹ Operating in a local context, small-scale climate justice alliances in the Pacific Northwest are increasingly coordinating their efforts to make a large-scale impact on the fossil fuel industry. The climate justice movement has identified one likely Achilles heel of the energy industry: shipping. The industry needs to ship equipment from ports into its oil, gas, and coal fields, and to ship the fossil fuels via rail, barge, and pipeline to coastal ports for access to the US market and shipment to global markets, particularly in Asia.²

The three growing fossil fuel sources in North America are in the middle of the continent: the Alberta Tar Sands, the Powder River Coal Basin, and the Bakken Oil Shale Basin. Every step of the way, small-scale alliances of environmental and climate justice activists, farmers and ranchers, and Native peoples are combining their forces to block plans to ship carbon and the technology to extract it. All three of these sources need outlets to global markets, via ports in the Pacific Northwest states of Washington and Oregon, so both states (along with British Columbia) are functioning as chokepoints for the fossil fuel industry. The region's Native/non-Native alliances are functioning as a "Thin Green Line" between North American fossil fuel basins and the growing Asian market and, as locally based frontline alliances, are successfully targeting the role of port terminals in fossil fuel shipping and equipment networks.³

In recent years, the climate-conscious US Pacific Northwest, along with British Columbia, has become a region on the cutting edge of curbing carbon emissions. But any efforts to mitigate greenhouse gases, adapt to climate change, or switch to renewable energies will become moot if the fossil fuel industry continues to expand in Alberta, the Great Plains, and beyond. The alliances of Native and non-Native communities are using their geographic advantages to roll back the growth of the fossil fuel industry, and in the process are building new bonds with each other across regional and racial divides.

Although they have not been covered in national media until very recently, such alliances are not necessarily a new phenomenon. Since the 1970s, small-scale unlikely alliances have joined Native communities with their rural non-Native neighbours to protect their common lands and waters, with little or no involvement by the "Big Green" environmental organizations. These unique convergences have confronted mines, dams, logging, powerlines, nuclear waste, military projects, and other threats to resource-based livelihoods. My main training has been as a community organizer in such alliances in South Dakota and Wisconsin, and I studied these alliances in my doctoral dissertation, conducting interviews with more than one hundred twenty alliance leaders and members, tracking common themes and strategies from their experiences.⁴ These alliances not only joined Natives and non-Natives to confront an outside threat as a common enemy but also shifted the consciousness and actions of the non-Native

participants, as they learned about the continuity of Indigenous cultural traditions, legal powers, and environmental resilience.⁵

In South Dakota in the late 1970s, Lakota communities and white ranchers were often at odds over water rights and the tribal claim to the sacred Black Hills.⁶ Yet despite the intense Indian-white conflicts, the two groups came together against coal and uranium mining, which would endanger the groundwater. The Native activists and white ranchers formed the Black Hills Alliance (where I began my activism four decades ago) to halt the mining plans, and later formed the Cowboy and Indian Alliance (or CIA), which has since worked to stop a bombing range, coal trains, and an oil pipeline.⁷

In roughly the same era of the 1960s and 1970s, a fishing rights conflict had torn apart Washington State. A federal court recognized treaty rights in the 1974 Boldt Decision, and by the 1980s the tribes began to use treaties as a legal tool to protect and restore fish habitat. The result was state-tribal “co-management,” with the 1989 Centennial Accord recognizing that the tribes have a seat at the table on natural resource issues outside the reservations. The Nisqually Tribe, for instance, is today recognized in its watershed as the lead entity in creating salmon habitat management plans for private farm owners, and state and federal agencies. The watershed is healing because the tribe is beginning to decolonize its historic lands.⁸

Another treaty confrontation erupted in northern Wisconsin in the late 1980s, when crowds of white sportsmen gathered to protest Ojibwe treaty rights to spear fish. Even as the racist harassment and violence raged, tribes presented their treaty rights as legal obstacles to mining plans, and formed alliances such as the Midwest Treaty Network.⁹ Instead of continuing to argue over the fish, some white fishing groups began to cooperate with tribes to protect the fish, and won victories against the world’s largest mining companies.¹⁰ After witnessing the fishing war, seeing the 2003 defeat of the Crandon mine gave tribal members some real hope.

In each of these cases, Native peoples and their rural white neighbours found common cause to defend their mutual place and unexpectedly came together to protect their environment and economy from an outside threat and a common enemy. They knew that if they continued to fight over resources, there might not be any left to fight over. Some rural whites began to see Native treaties and sovereignty as better protectors

of common ground than their own governments. Racial prejudice is still alive and well in these regions, but the organized racist groups are weaker because they have lost many of their followers to these alliances.¹¹

Successful alliances challenge the idea that “particularism” (such as Native identity) is always in contradiction to “universalism” (such as environmental protection). The assertion of Indigenous political strength does *not* weaken the idea of joining with non-Natives to defend the land, and can even strengthen it with the power of tribal sovereignty. The stories of these small-scale alliances identify ways to reconcile differences between cultures with the goal of finding common-ground similarities between them. They offer possible lessons on how to weave together the politics of unity and identity.

In the process, small-scale rural environmental groups are partnering with neighbouring Indigenous nations that can “jump scales” by bringing national and international attention to seemingly local and isolated environmental concerns.¹² Although Native reservations exist at a small scale geographically, their political and economic power extends outward into neighbouring non-Native communities. In the treaties, they retained the right to hunt, fish, and gather outside reservation boundaries, and their tribal sovereignty establishes a nation-to-nation relationship between their tribal governments and federal agencies. Local-scale environmental campaigns can be “supersized” into larger-scale campaigns when and if tribal nations get involved, without sacrificing local decision making. Tribal sovereignty, rather than diminishing the power of neighbouring non-Native communities, can strengthen both communities’ universalist goals of protecting the land and water for everyone.

Spatial Strategies

The place-based small green alliances opposing fossil fuel shipping are developing new ways to think globally, but act locally, to help roll back carbon pollution. Geographic strategies to stop equipment from reaching the oil fields, or to block fossil fuels from being shipped via rail or pipeline, can be more effective if they are coordinated continent-wide. The goal is to make the expansion of energy projects more costly and risky, and ultimately to downsize them.

A 2014 study titled “Conflict Translates Environmental and Social Risks into Business Costs” spells out how social movement opposition raises costs for resource extraction companies. As the authors write: “High commodity prices have fuelled the expansion of mining and hydrocarbon extraction. These developments profoundly transform environments, communities, and economies, and frequently generate social conflict. Our analysis shows that mining and hydrocarbon companies fail to factor in the full scale of the costs of conflict.”¹³ In a Harvard Kennedy School study, Rachel Davis and Daniel Franks (two of the authors of the 2014 study) further observed that “the greatest costs of conflict . . . were the opportunity costs in terms of the lost value linked to future projects, expansion plans, or sales that did not go ahead. The costs most often overlooked by companies were indirect costs resulting from staff time being diverted to managing conflict—particularly senior management time.”¹⁴

By blocking shipping plans, small-scale climate justice forces can combine efforts to help to prevent the rapid expansion of the energy industry, by keeping more of the fossil fuels in the ground and by delaying projects, thereby costing companies money, further hindering their ability to execute future projects. The energy companies can also play a geographical “shell game” to shift burdens around the landscape, and pit communities against each other, such as Native and non-Native communities. The most effective rural alliances have been those (such as in the Pacific Northwest) that have crossed cultural lines and created relationships and collaboration that corporate planners had not anticipated.¹⁵ In the process, they become less vulnerable to corporate divide-and-conquer tactics and begin to find common ground beyond the environmental concern that initially brought them together.

Important alliances have brought together tribal members and large-scale environmental organizations—such as Greenpeace—as evidenced by the 2015 actions of “kayaktivists” and tribal canoes against Shell oil drilling rigs headed from the Pacific Northwest to Alaska.¹⁶ But it is often easy for corporations to portray “Big Green” urban-based environmental groups as “outsiders” who do not care about rural jobs or people. The strongest alliances are those established in defence of a common place, and a local alliance of tribes and non-Native residents may be more able to defeat environmental threats as a legitimized force of “insiders” than an

alliance only between rural tribes and urban environmental activists who can be successfully be portrayed as “outsiders” (when the real outsiders are the corporations themselves).

In the Pacific Northwest, if the 1974 Boldt Decision had gone the other way, or if the tribes had not used their treaty rights to protect and restore fish habitat, the Pacific Northwest would be more industrialized and damaged than it already is.¹⁷ The legal power of the treaties enables the tribes to co-manage the natural resources, and tribal sovereignty enables them to put up barriers to damaging projects, and seize opportunities to heal and decolonize the landscape.

As author Naomi Klein notes,

One of the most exciting parts of the emergence of this fossil fuel resistance . . . is the way in which it is building really powerful ties between non-Native and Native communities. . . . I think what more and more of us are starting to understand is that Indigenous First Nations, treaty rights, and aboriginal title, are the most powerful legal barrier to the plans to just flay this continent. And those rights become more powerful when there are mass movements defending them, and when they are embraced by whole societies.¹⁸

The leading role of tribal nations and First Nations is most evident in the growing movements to keep fossil fuels in the ground and challenge the shipping of oil and coal from interior basins to coastal ports. These basins include the Alberta Tar Sands, the Powder River Coal Basin of Montana and Wyoming, and the Bakken Oil Shale Basin centred on North Dakota.

Alberta Tar Sands

Oil industry opponents describe the Alberta Tar Sands as the “Mordor” of the industry, with some northern tracts of the province turned into a wasteland, air quality degraded to the level of Beijing, and Cree and Métis communities contaminated with toxic chemicals in their water.¹⁹ The fights to block two proposed tar-sands pipelines, against the Keystone XL pipeline in the Great Plains, and the Enbridge Northern Gateway

pipeline across northern British Columbia, led by Native peoples, are by now well known.²⁰

But lesser known in the United States is that tar-sands oil is now pumped through the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline to Burnaby, near Vancouver, British Columbia, to the Ferndale refinery on former Lummi land in Washington, and to the Anacortes refinery on former Swinomish land—the latter two taken by White House executive orders in the 1870s.²¹ The pipeline has ruptured at times, but the company has proposed a second, parallel pipeline along the existing route, opposed by many First Nations and allies.²² The proposal for a second, parallel pipeline would vastly increase oil tanker traffic in the narrow inter-island straits of the Salish Sea, which is an already risky environment for salmon and orcas. First Nations in British Columbia and Washington tribal governments joined to intervene against the second pipeline.²³ Indigenous nations on both sides of the border united together in 2014 in the Nawtsamaat Alliance to sign an International Treaty to Protect the Sacredness of the Salish Sea, and sought endorsements from allies fighting fossil fuel shipping.²⁴

Oil companies are also engaged in “heavy hauls” of gargantuan mining equipment, called “megaloads,” *from* Pacific Northwest ports to northern Alberta. Direct actions by Nez Perce tribal council members and other Idaho residents forced the 2013 cancellation of a proposed heavy haul along winding river roads through Lolo Pass. Members of the Umatilla and Warm Springs tribes have more recently been confronting the “megaloads” off-loaded from barges in eastern Oregon.²⁵ But the main sources of fossil fuel shipping in Pacific Northwest ports are from two lesser-known basins.

Powder River Coal Basin

The Powder River Coal Basin, in Wyoming and Montana, has been a fossil fuel frontier since the early 1970s and produces 42 percent of US coal.²⁶ Strip-mining machines the size of a twenty-storey building ravage the landscape, removing the “overburden” topsoil and leaving behind a sterile “hardpan” surface where nothing can grow. In coal boom towns (such as Gillette, Wyoming), trailer parks have colonized the hillsides, as the local

community extends its public services for the influx of miners, leading to an inevitable “boom-and-bust” effect.

In the late 1970s, Northern Cheyenne allied with white ranchers to curb the proliferation of coal plants, with the tribe declaring its air to be Class I (the highest quality) under EPA “Treatment As State” non-degradation rules.²⁷ The alliance marked one of the first times that the “cow-boys” supported the “Indians” in protecting their common environment and livelihood, despite continuing differences between the communities.

Given the widespread success of environmental alliances in rolling back the coal industry in the United States in the twenty-first century, the industry is turning toward exports to growing Asian economies as the key to future profits.²⁸ The energy industry is now proposing to ship Powder River Basin coal to Asia through northwest ports. Environmentalists, farmers, ranchers, and tribes fear the coal dust from the trains (up to a ton of dust from each of 150 rail cars) would endanger waterways along the routes and the health of local people and livestock.²⁹

Only one west coast port, in Tsawwassen, British Columbia, currently has a coal-export terminal.³⁰ In 2013 to 2015, local opponents defeated coal terminals proposed in Aberdeen, Washington, and St. Helens, Coos Bay, and Boardman/Turkey Point, Oregon. By 2016, the Gateway Pacific Terminal project at Cherry Point, near Bellingham, and the Millennium Bulk Terminal, near Longview on the Columbia, were the two remaining Washington proposals. The Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians took a strong stand against all the proposed coal and oil terminals.³¹

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission opposed plans for coal barges along the Columbia Gorge as a threat to the treaty salmon fishing of four tribes, as did tribal members along the coal train route.³² Thousands of people attended scoping hearings on the projects in the two states, and dozens of towns and cities passed resolutions against the plans, with local governments questioning the traffic tie-ups, noise, and delays in other rail shipments. Although some labour union members supported the plan for jobs, others opposed it as helping to export jobs to China, and for contributing to climate change.

Cherry Point would be the largest coal terminal on the west coast, exporting 48 million metric tons a year. But Cherry Point (Xwe’chi’eXen, in the Lummi dialect of the Lushootseed Salish language) is the site of a

3,500-year-old village and its sacred burial ground, which the company has already desecrated. The rail trestle would be built 300 feet out into a historic reef-net salmon fishing area, where ancient anchors have been found. The area has historically hosted one of the few herring spawning grounds in the northwest United States.³³ The Lummi saw the coal plan as a violation of the 1855 Point Elliott Treaty, which guarantees the tribes' access to fish in their "usual and accustomed grounds."

In 2012, the Lummi Tribal Council symbolically burned a \$1 million check, to make the statement that no amount of company money will convince them to back the project.³⁴ The tribe was able to lend its powerful voice to assist local coal terminal opponents and attract the attention of federal agencies and national media. Even though the non-tribal fishing fleet in the Cherry Point area was five times larger than the tribal fleet, the Lummi had to assist non-Indian fishers to have their voices heard. During the crab harvest opening that year, the Whatcom Commercial Fishermen's Association (led by a non-Native president and a Lummi vice-president) organized tribal and non-tribal boats in a protest flotilla, in which the twenty fishing and crabbing vessels displayed signs with slogans such as "Our Goal: No Coal."³⁵

Just as the Lummi are leading the movement to stop the coal terminal in Washington, Northern Cheyenne tribal members came to the forefront of the movement to stop the proposed Otter Creek coal mine and Tongue River Railroad at the other end of the rail line.³⁶ They see stopping the coal export terminals as key to stopping new Montana coal mining operations. As such, they testified at Northwest hearings, again in conjunction with white ranchers from the Tongue River Valley around Colstrip, Montana.³⁷

Montana tribes and ranchers had previously united in the 1970s to slow coal mining and in the 1990s to stop gold mining.³⁸ But now we see strong Native/non-Native alliances at both ends of this coal shipping route, which have expanded the scale of conflict. Northern Cheyenne organizer Vanessa Braided Hair observes of the company, "what Arch Coal doesn't understand is community. . . . They don't understand the fierceness with which the people, Indian and non-Indian, in southeastern Montana love the land."³⁹ Rancher Roger Sprague says of the Northern Cheyenne, "we're neighbors with these people, and we're proud to work with these people. We don't want this mine in here. . . . It's our life. We've fought hard to put

it together, and we'd like to keep it that way."⁴⁰ In 2013–17, Lummi carver Jewell James led a series of totem pole journeys, taking his poles between the Northern Plains and the Northwest to demonstrate the unity of many Indigenous peoples and allies along fossil fuel train and pipeline routes.⁴¹ In March 2016, the Otter Creek coal mine and Tongue River railroad were defeated.⁴²

Oglala Lakota anti-coal activist Krystal Two Bulls observed that a true alliance

is a relationship. It's like a family. . . . I think because of these alliances being built, I think it's going to set precedents for other relationships. . . . These farmers and ranchers are going to be leading the way in paving the road for other farmers and ranchers to be able to see we can work together. . . . I think that's the role of a true ally. In looking at historically these Big Green organizations coming into Indigenous communities and parachuting in, and just doing whatever their framework says they should do and then leaving, that's been the precedent for so long. Now you're looking at these alliances where these people are working together on a common ground, so they're actually showing and exhibiting true allyship, where they're coming in and meeting them at the same level as opposed to coming in and saying this is how we're going to do it, you can be a part of it.⁴³

Using their treaty rights, sovereign powers and federal trust responsibility, some US tribes can draw federal agencies and courts into the fray in a way that local and state governments cannot. In Washington State, federal court decisions have recognized Native rights to fish, hunt, and gather outside the reservations, and to “co-manage” the fishery with the state government.⁴⁴ Because harm to streams and rivers would violate these treaty rights, Washington tribes have a role in protecting and restoring fish habitat.⁴⁵ In 2007, a federal court even used the treaties to order the state to protect salmon from poorly constructed culverts.⁴⁶ Tribes cannot move away from risks or shift their treaty harvesting areas, because they

are fixed in place. Because of their commitment to stay in the place, tribes can offer a strong cultural anchor to place-based environmental movements that makes them less willing to compromise.

In May 2016, the Army Corps of Engineers backed the Lummi treaty case against the coal terminal, effectively dooming the project.⁴⁷ By increasing the costs for the industry, opponents are increasing the costs of shipping and (even if they lose a battle or two) severely limiting the bulk volume of coal that can be shipped for export. By making fossil fuel shipments more socially and economically costly, they are bringing closer the day when the energy economy is forced to convert to renewable fuels. As long as subsidized fossil fuels remain cheaper, the needed conversion to renewables will never take place.

Bakken Oil Shale Basin

The Bakken oil shale formation in North Dakota is a growing fossil fuel frontier zone, around the new boom town of Williston.⁴⁸ The process of *fracking* (described by Willow in this volume) has recently made the state number two in US oil production, after Texas. Fracking has been an environmental concern, lowering water tables and contaminating water with chemicals, gases, and oil spills, yet under the “Halliburton Loophole,” the process is exempt from the Safe Drinking Water Act. The oil boom has been a social scourge, with housing shortages, drug use, prostitution in “man camps,” and endless traffic of chemical and water trucks.⁴⁹

Although the Fort Berthold tribal government originally supported the fracking for development, some tribal members have been displaced, and others fear an increase in cancers that they claim have been climbing as a result of previous oil and coal development.⁵⁰ Tribal members have pressured tribal leadership to roll back their approval for fracking.⁵¹ Tribal member Kandi Mossett of the Indigenous Environmental Network testified that “several community members, including myself, are tired of being sick. . . . We are taking a stand and fighting back, not only for our own lives but for the lives of those who cannot speak for themselves, and we will not stop fighting until we have reached a true level of environmental and climate justice in our Indigenous lands.”⁵² In North Dakota, the shipment of Bakken oil sparked the resistance to the construction of the

Dakota Access Pipeline on treaty lands next to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in 2016–17.⁵³

Because the companies only care about profitable oil, the natural gas is flared off, making the Bakken glow like a city, visible from Earth's orbit. Bakken crude is more volatile than other oil, so when oil trains derail they erupt in huge explosions, like the 2013 fireball that killed forty-seven people in Quebec. There were more oil train spills in 2013 than in the thirty-seven years prior.⁵⁴ Rail safety concerns have led many Northwest communities to grow concerned about increasing Bakken oil rail traffic.

Washington ports propose to receive rail shipments of fracked crude oil from North Dakota. According to the Sightline Institute, if all Northwest oil, coal, and gas projects proceeded, they would cumulatively ship the carbon equivalent of five Keystone XL pipelines.⁵⁵ A Tesoro oil terminal planned for Vancouver, Washington, across the Columbia from Portland has met strong local opposition.⁵⁶ Up to fifty oil trains a month, each 1.5 miles long, would supply three oil terminals in Aberdeen, where Bakken oil would be loaded into enormous tankers, next to key migratory bird habitat.⁵⁷ A lawsuit by the Quinault Nation and environmental groups, who are also concerned about the effects of an oil tanker spill on local fisheries and shellfish beds, convinced the state to revoke permits for the oil terminals, pending an Environmental Impact Statement.⁵⁸

Nearly unanimous public opposition emerged in 2014–16 during a series of Department of Ecology hearings along the proposed oil train route.⁵⁹ On the morning he passed, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission Chairman Billy Frank Jr. posted his last blog, supporting the Quinault Nation's position. He wrote, "It's clear that crude oil can be explosive and the tankers used to transport it by rail are simply unsafe. . . . Everyone knows that oil and water don't mix, and neither do oil and fish. . . . It's not a matter of whether spills will happen, it's a matter of when."⁶⁰

The Grays Harbor community in Washington State has historically been hostile to outside large-scale mainstream environmental groups, whom they blame for the closure of local timber mills when the Northwest "spotted owl wars" pitted logging jobs against endangered species protection.⁶¹ But the new small-scale alliances are able to frame themselves as "insiders" in the local area, tied to the ancient Indigenous presence on the land. As Quinault Vice President Tyson Johnston commented, some local

residents “will lump us in too with a lot of the environmental groups and we do carry a lot of those values, but we’re in this for very different reasons such as sovereignty, our future generations.”⁶²

The Quinault Nation had traditionally been at odds with the Washington Dungeness Crab Fishermen’s Association, which has challenged Quinault treaty-backed crab harvests. But as Association Vice President Larry Thevik pointed out, the oil terminal proposals have “united us in the preservation of the resource that we bicker over. It has also kind of created a new channel of communication because . . . those of us at the bottom of the food chain, the actual fishers, have been able to talk somewhat directly to another nation.”⁶³ Joe Schumacker, the Quinault Nation Marine Resources Scientist, agreed that “with no resource, there’s no battle . . . we have to maintain what’s out there. Those people, those local crabbers out here are almost as place-based as the tribes. I will never say that they are as place-based, but they feel so deeply rooted here and it’s part of their lives. . . . We find ourselves working together on these matters.”⁶⁴

Quinault President Fawn Sharp (also President of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians) was born in 1970 “at the height of the fishing rights conflict. I was a young child, but was very impressionable. At eight years old, I understood what treaty abrogation meant, that there were others trying to wipe out the entire livelihood of not only my family, but my larger Quinault family.”⁶⁵ Sharp reflected that “part of the relationship that we have today arose out of generations of disputes. Through those disputes, whether they liked us . . . didn’t like us . . . they came to know and understand Quinault and our values, and where we are and what we’re about. . . . For us, a lot of the relationships we have with our neighbors arose out of a relationship of much division, strife and conflict, but through that . . . they’ve come to know who we are. That, to me, is a foundational bit of understanding.”

Sharp was later impressed in meeting Larry Thevik and other local crabbers when they worked for a renewable energy project and against a coal terminal and agreed to work together with the Quinault even as they disagreed about crab harvest allocation. When the oil terminal issue emerged, Sharp noted that she “thought we need to develop these partnerships because this oil issue is so much larger than Quinault Nation.” She added a “footnote of hope” that “the cooperation that we’re seeing now

is going to provide another sort of step of maturity and good faith and alliance and looking beyond special interest or individual interest to the greater good. Perhaps today's generation and younger people growing up in this political climate will come to understand that it is so much better to work together with neighbors.”

By August 2017, all three of the Grays Harbor oil terminal projects had been defeated, and by January 2018 the State of Washington also rejected an application for an even larger oil terminal at Vancouver, on the Columbia River.⁶⁶ Despite the Trump administration's increased push for the fossil fuel industry, Pacific Northwest citizens have effectively defeated nearly all of the proposed oil and coal terminals. The attention of Washington tribes has turned toward Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), as the Puyallup Tribe led opposition to an LNG plant in Tacoma.⁶⁷

Alliances in the Fossil Fuel Wars

Similar “unlikely alliances” of Native peoples and their rural white neighbours are standing strong against fossil fuel and mining projects elsewhere in the continent. In Nebraska and South Dakota, grassroots coalitions of Native peoples and white ranchers and farmers are fighting the Keystone XL pipeline.⁶⁸ The aptly named “Cowboy and Indian Alliance” (CIA) originated in a cross-border treaty between tribes, First Nations, and their allies against the pipeline from the Alberta Tar Sands.⁶⁹ The pipeline company tried to buy off some farmers by moving the pipeline route away from their lands—but those farmers have not given up the fight, and continue to work with others who are still directly affected, including Native communities.⁷⁰

In 2014, the “CIA” erected a *tipi* encampment on the National Mall and held a horse procession in Washington, DC.⁷¹ Freelance journalist Kristin Moe observed:

The environmental movement has long come under criticism for being led by the so-called Big Greens—largely white, middle class membership groups whose interests don't often represent those actually living in the frontline communities where the pipeline will be built. But the coali-

tion of cowboys and Indians offers a radical departure from this history. Moreover, it is a model of relationship-based organizing, rooted in a kind of spirituality often absent from the progressive world, and—given the role of indigenous leaders—begins to address the violence of colonization in a meaningful way.⁷²

Farmers and ranchers oppose eminent domain by stressing their right to private property, which in their case, of course, was originally land stolen from the tribes. So tribes insist that their allies not only fight damaging projects but also become stewards of the land and help to protect sacred sites on their property. As Yankton Nakota elder Faith Spotted Eagle states, “We come from two cultures that clashed over land, and so this is a healing for the generations.”⁷³

In the Maritimes, Mi’kmaq and Maliseet are confronting shale gas fracking, joined by Acadian and Anglophone neighbours.⁷⁴ Climate change enables the expansion of the scope of conflict to encompass a wide range of rural and urban communities. The climate justice movement’s focus on regional and global climate change enables a wider scale of collaboration than purely localist approaches that can succumb to corporate “divide-and-conquer” tactics.

In the Great Lakes, Bad River Ojibwe and Menominee are leading the fight to stop metallic mining, drawing on past anti-mining alliances of Ojibwe and white fishers, and Ho-Chunk and other local residents are protesting frac sand mining.⁷⁵ The key to any successful environmental strategy is to turn it from a Not In My Back Yard struggle to a Not In Anybody’s Back Yard struggle. Alliances have to anticipate and respond to wedge issues that may racially divide an alliance, such as geographically moving the burden of negative environmental effects away from white communities and toward Native communities, in the hopes that the white residents will abandon their opposition.⁷⁶

The Idle No More movement that emerged in Canada in 2012–13 similarly connects First Nations’ sovereignty to the protection of the Earth for all people—Native and non-Native alike. Idle No More co-founder Sylvia McAdam states, “Indigenous sovereignty is all about protecting the land, the water, the animals, and all the environment we share.”⁷⁷ Gyasi Ross

observes that Idle No More (or the Indigenous Nationhood Movement) “is about protecting the Earth for all people from the carnivorous and capitalistic spirit that wants to exploit and extract every last bit of resources from the land. . . . It’s not a Native thing or a white thing, it’s an Indigenous worldview thing. It’s a ‘protect the Earth’ thing.”⁷⁸ Leanne Simpson sees Idle No More as

an opportunity for the environmental movement, for social-justice groups, and for mainstream Canadians to stand with us. . . . We have a lot of ideas about how to live gently within our territory in a way where we have separate jurisdictions and separate nations but over a shared territory. I think there’s a responsibility on the part of mainstream community and society to figure out a way of living more sustainably and extracting themselves from extractivist thinking.⁷⁹

Cooperation Growing from Conflict

It would make logical sense that the greatest Native/non-Native cooperation would develop in the areas with the least prior conflict. Yet a recurring irony is that cooperation more easily developed in areas where tribes had most strongly asserted their rights, and the white backlash had been the most intense. Treaty claims in the short run caused conflict but in the long run educated whites about tribal cultures and legal powers, and strengthened the commitment of both communities to value the resources. A common “sense of place” extended beyond the immediate threat, and it redefined their idea of “home” to include their neighbours. As Mole Lake Ojibwe elder Frances Van Zile said, “This is my home; when it’s your home you try to take as good care of it as how can, including all the people in it.”⁸⁰

This is not to say that all tribal nations have treaty rights, or that they all use treaties for environmental protection. Tribal governments are under the same economic pressures to accept corporate development as are other governments. In fact, the Crow and Navajo tribal councils have

promoted their own coal mines, and the tribal governments on the Fort Berthold and Uintah-Ouray reservations have allowed fracking, over the objections of some tribal members. But when tribal nations do support environmental protection, they have powerful legal tools and can use tribal sovereignty within reservation boundaries, and treaty rights in ceded territories outside the reservations. Native nations in the Pacific Northwest use their treaty rights not to romanticize an idyllic vision of an Indigenous past but to safeguard their cultural revitalization and resource-based economic livelihood into the future.

Of course, not all treaty conflicts have led to environmental cooperation, mainly because some white neighbours of the tribes do not support environmental protection in the first place. In places such as Alberta and Arizona, many white communities and governments are hostile to both Indigenous sovereignty and environmentalists. The formation of alliances presupposes willing partners in both the Native and non-Native communities, who aim to protect land and water as necessary for their well-being. Even when the conditions exist for an alliance, it takes conscious leadership to put it into motion. The initial bridges are usually built by Native and non-Native neighbours who have some prior contact with the other community.

Alliances based on “universalist” similarities are vulnerable to failure if they fail to respect “particularist” differences. The idea of “why can’t we all just get along” (like “United We Stand” or “All Lives Matter”) is sometimes used to suppress marginalized voices, asking them to sideline their demands in the interest of the “common good.” This overemphasis on unity makes alliances more vulnerable, since authorities may try to divide them by meeting the demands of the (relatively advantaged) white members. A few alliances—such as against low-level military flights in southern Wisconsin—floundered because the white “allies” declared victory for their particular demands and went home, and did not keep up the fight to also win the demands of their Native neighbours. “Unity” is not enough when it is a unity of unequal partners; Native leadership needs to always be involved in the decision-making process.⁸¹

But successful alliances can go beyond temporary “alliances of convenience” to building more durable, lasting connections. In the course of working together with Native neighbours for short-term self-interest,

initially using tribal rights for their own benefit, many non-Natives learn in the long term about the historical continuity of tribal cultures and legal powers, and develop collaborations and friendships that last beyond the resolving of the immediate environmental issue. For example, farmers and ranchers learn about sacred sites located on their property, and then open access to tribal members.⁸² In other cases, the cooperation recedes after the alliance fades away, but the next alliance is much easier to form around another environmental threat, in a “two steps forward, one step back” pattern.

In Washington State, local tribal/non-tribal cooperation to restore salmon habitat provides a template for collaboration in response to climate change. The Tulalip Tribes, for example, are cooperating with dairy farmers to keep cattle waste out of the Snohomish watershed’s salmon streams, by converting it into biogas energy.⁸³ The Tulalip are also exploring collaborative plans to store glacial and snowpack runoff to lessen spring floods and summer droughts that have been exacerbated by warming temperatures.⁸⁴ Local governments who had battled the Swinomish Tribe over water rights are now collaborating to prevent coastal flooding and sea level rise.⁸⁵ The Nisqually Tribe and City of Olympia agreed to shift their main source of freshwater from the sacred McAllister Springs to wells on higher ground, out of the reach of future sea level rise.⁸⁶ Many other stories of local and regional collaboration for resilience are being told in the Pacific Northwest.⁸⁷

Non-Native Responsibilities

The continued existence of Native nationhood today undermines the claims of settler colonial states to the land.⁸⁸ Unlikely alliances can help chip away at the legitimacy of colonial structures, *even among some of the settlers themselves*, when they begin to realize that Native sovereignty has become a more effective guardian of their own land, water, and livelihood than their own non-Native governments. Rancher Paul Seamans, of Dakota Rural Action, told me the Lakota “feel the government should step up and do what’s right by them on the 1868 Treaty. . . . They’re not after the deeded land. They would like the government to recognize that they’ve been screwed, and . . . to have the federal and state lands back. . . . After

being around them and listening to their point of view, I get to thinking, ‘hey, if I was Indian I would be doing the same exact damn thing that they’re doing.’”⁸⁹ Through the process of common opposition to a harmful project, white communities often find out about other past and present Native grievances.

Many rural whites, who at first pragmatically “exploited” tribal powers for their own short-term self-interest, learned in the long term about the continuity of tribal cultures and nationhood, and came to realize the value of those powers on their own merits. Naomi Klein asserts, “It has to be more than an extractive relationship to those rights: ‘those rights are useful to us, because they help us protect our water, so we want to use those rights’—that’s exactly the wrong way of thinking about this. These are rights that come out of a vision of how to live well, that were hard-won and hard-protected, and they point us towards a non-extractive regeneration-based way of living on this planet. That is the most hopeful and exciting part of this new wave of activism.”⁹⁰

To stand in solidarity with Indigenous nations is not just to “support Native rights” but to strike at the very underpinnings of the Western social order that de-indigenized Europeans before the colonization of North America even started, and begin to free both Native and non-Native peoples from that order for the sake of our collective survival. As Vancouver activist Harsha Walia writes, “I have been encouraged to think of human interconnectedness and kinship in building alliances with Indigenous communities. . . . Striving toward decolonization and walking together toward transformation requires us to challenge a dehumanizing social organization that perpetuates our isolation from each other and normalizes a lack of responsibility to one another and the Earth.”⁹¹

By asserting their treaty rights, Indigenous nations are benefiting not only themselves but also their treaty partners. Since descendants of the original European settlers in North America are more separated in time and place from their indigenous origins, they benefit from respectfully working together with Native nations to help find their own path to what it means to be a human being living on the Earth—without appropriating Native cultures. The non-Native role is not to look at oneself merely as an individual “ally,” and fail to take any action until we have cleansed

ourselves of all personal racism, but to become *part of an alliance*, to collectively take on racist institutions as we work on ourselves.

Our role is not simply to learn from Native peoples, and extract knowledge that can serve non-Native purposes, but to recognize that the tribal exercise of power can serve Native and non-Native people alike. It is not the role of non-Natives to dissect Native cultures but to study Native/non-Native relations, and white attitudes and policies. The responsibility of non-Natives is to help remove the barriers and obstacles to Native sovereignty in their *own* governments and communities.

As the current “fossil fuel wars” show, non-Native neighbours can begin to look to Native nations for models to make North America more socially just, more ecologically resilient, and more hopeful. As Red Cliff Ojibwe organizer Walt Bresette once told non-Natives fighting a proposed mine, “You can all love this land as much as we do.”⁹²

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