

The paradox of Indigenous resurgence at the end of empire

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, we are facing the unprecedented convergence of human-created crises. Climate chaos, fossil-fuel resource depletion, overpopulation, and the ongoing destruction of ecosystems threaten the very foundation of colonial empire, both creating emancipatory potential for Indigenous societies struggling against colonial subjugation and wreaking devastating havoc on the lands, waters, and ecosystems upon which our people must survive. While the vulnerability and unsustainability of empire is clearly exposed, Indigenous people must wrestle with the continued cooptation of our people into civilization's fallacies and destructive habits as well as the increasing threats to our homelands that jeopardize our capacity for a land-based existence. Thus, just when liberation may be within our grasp, the ecological destruction may be so complete that Indigenous lifeways may be impossible to practice. In this context there is a simultaneous and urgent need for both the restoration of sustainable Indigenous practices and a serious defense of Indigenous homelands.

Keywords: *Indigenous peoples, climate change, empire, collapse of civilization, resurgence, liberation*

Introduction

“Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.”
—Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2005, p. 206)

In the twenty-first century, we all face what some experts are calling the “perfect storm of ecological and social problems.” The past eighteen Blue Planet Laureates have written that society has “no choice but to take dramatic action to avert a collapse of civilization. Either we will change our ways and build an entirely new kind of global society, or they will be changed

for us” (Vidal, 2012). Indeed, what we are experiencing is the endgame of empire—the time when Earth can no longer feed the rapacious appetite of imperial powers or support the paradigm of unlimited growth. It is the time when, each day, hundreds of species sing their final death songs before entering the abyss of physical extinction. It is the time when the world’s remaining eco-systems teeter on the brink of collapse, dreading the next assault that might tip them over the edge. It is the time when even the colonizers are grasping the implications of their destructiveness and when the finiteness of the planet grows more apparent every day. We are experiencing the unprecedented convergence of human-created crises.

This is no surprise to Indigenous Peoples. We have all witnessed the destructiveness of this society within our own homelands. In the Dakota homeland of *Minisota Makoce* (Land Where the Waters Reflect the Skies), for example, my people have seen the heartbreaking effects of colonial occupation in the loss of 98 percent of Minnesota’s white pines, 90 percent of the wetlands, 98 percent of the Big Woods of southern Minnesota, and 99 percent of our prairies. Our beloved buffalo relatives who once roamed freely here are non-existent. The farmers have installed so much drain-tiling into wetland areas, turning diverse ecosystems into corn and soybean fields, that they have changed the entire hydrology of the southern third of Minnesota. Their petroleum-based agricultural industry is destroying the exposed topsoil many times faster than it can be replenished and threatening our once fertile agricultural lands with desertification. Meanwhile, mining industries seek to extract every last bit of iron ore, taconite, aggregate, peat, and silica sand from the earth. While mining, industrial agriculture, animal feedlots, and manufacturing all contribute to the continuing toxification of our homeland, nuclear and coal-burning power plants devastate life downwind, downgrade and downstream from their production sites.ⁱ Even along the North Shore of Minnesota, which is generally considered more pristine by environmental critics, a new scientific study just revealed that one in ten newborn babies have unhealthy levels of mercury (Marcotty, 2012). Yet, this destruction has continued unabated. And, when all these effects are multiplied by the destruction in every Indigenous homeland across the globe, the magnitude of the problem is overwhelming. There will be no escaping the consequences of hyper-exploitation and the dramatic rise in CO2 emissions and we will not be constrained by the problems within our immediate vicinity. As Garth Lenz (2012) states quite accurately in his excellent lecture addressing the *True Cost of Oil*, “We all live downstream in an era of global climate change.”

Our ancestors knew it could not last. From the earliest days our predecessors recognized the destructiveness of the invaders’ ways. Charlot, a Flathead chief, spoke this about the invaders as they faced the theft of their home in the Bitterroot Mountains in 1876: “He comes like a day that has passed and night enters our future with him.... He has filled graves with our bones. His horses, his cattle, his sheep, his men, his women have a rot.... His course is destruction; he spoils what the spirit who gave us this country made beautiful and clean” (Turner III, 1974, p. 254). In 1877, the Lakota leader Sitting Bull offered a similar commentary on this race of overbearing people: “Strangely enough they have a mind to till the soil and the love of possession is a disease with them....They claim this mother of ours, the earth, for their own and fence their neighbors

away; they deface her with buildings and their refuse. That nation is like a spring freshet that overruns its banks and destroys all who are in its path.” Sitting Bull goes on to say “We cannot dwell side by side” (Turner III, 1974, p. 255). Though various Indigenous Peoples had lived side by side for millennia, here was recognition that the ways of the Americans were different. It would not be possible to co-exist with these destructive practices. Pretty Shield, a Crow woman, described the difference between the happiest days of her life when they were following the buffalo herds to the days after their slaughter: “Ahh, my heart fell down when I began to see dead buffalo scattered all over our beautiful country, killed and skinned, left to rot by white men, many, many hundreds of buffalo...Our hearts were like stones. And yet nobody believed, even then, that the white man could kill *all* the buffalo” (Calloway, 1996, p. 131). Who could have imagined the kind of wholesale slaughter that ensued?

The cause of this destruction might ultimately be rooted in what historian Jack Forbes has described as a de-sanctification of the earth. He tells us, “The significance of de-sanctifying the earth, the animals, the plants, the trees, and even human beings is that the world is made a potentially ugly and very exploitable place” (Forbes, 2008, p. 80). This de-sanctification is manifested in a thousand different ways on Indigenous homelands and there does not seem to be any mass movement away from this trajectory of exploitation. De-sanctification of the earth might be attributed to the origin of agriculture 10,000 years ago as this marked a significant turning point in human history. With agriculture, food became a commodity and a means to achieve wealth. Author Richard Manning contends: “What we are today—civilized, city-bound, overpopulated, literate, organized, wealthy, poor, diseased, conquered, and conquerors—is all rooted in the domestication of plants and animals” (Manning, 2004, p. 23). In addition, the de-sanctification of non-human life was certainly codified in the Genesis hierarchy and embodied in Judeo-Christian teachings. While this hierarchy of creation is conveyed throughout the Old Testament, it is best elucidated in the Book of Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” This mandate for human (and male) domination over all other beings has contributed to the relentless pursuit of resources without substantive regard to the impacts on eco-systems and all the beings who inhabit them.

Indigenous Peoples recognized the dangers inherent in that worldview, especially as the consequences of that worldview were materially manifested within our territories through the destructive actions of the colonizers. Our ancestors watched the devastation unfold, generally first with our neighbors, and then many fought to defend the integrity of our own homelands. In 1811, for example, Tecumseh warned, “Where today are the Pequot? Where are the Narragansett, the Mohican, the Pocanet, and other powerful tribes of our people? They have vanished before the avarice and oppression of the white man, as snow before the summer sun....Will we be ourselves destroyed in our turn, without making an effort worthy of our race? Shall we without a struggle, give up our homes, our lands, bequeathed to us by the Great Spirit? The graves of our dead and everything that is dear and sacred to us?...I know you will say with

me, Never! Never!...Sleep not longer...in false security and delusive hopes....Will not the bones of our dead be plowed up and their graves turned to plowed fields?" (Turner III, 1974, p. 247). In spite of the spirited resistance of Tecumseh and other Indigenous people, American colonial forces defeated them. Successive waves of resistance in the United States and Canada, while still present, have rarely taken the form of the kind of militaristic warfare engaged by Tecumseh and other early resistance leaders. Why is this, especially today when we are experiencing threats to our homeland that jeopardize our very survival?

Disconnection from the land

For most of us in the United States and Canada, our relationship to our homelands has changed in very practical ways. Environmental activist and author Derrick Jensen illuminates a primary factor influencing the kinds of actions we will take in defense of the land. He asks readers: "Who feeds you? What is your source of life? To whom do you owe your life?" He then remarks:

If your experience—far deeper than belief or perception—is that your food comes from the grocery store (and your water from the tap), from the economic system, from the social system we call civilization, it is to this you will pledge back your life. If you experience this social system as the source of your life, you will be responsible to this social system. You will defend this social system to your very death.

If your experience—far deeper than belief or perception—is that food and water come from your landbase, or more broadly from the living earth, you will make and keep promises to your landbase in exchange for this food....You will be responsible to the community that supplies you with food and water. You will defend this community to your very death. (Jensen, 2006, p. 696)

Inherent in this passage is a recognition that we are what we live. No matter what we think or believe, or think we believe in the intellectual realm, our lived reality might be something different and we will make decisions accordingly. Our ancestors who found their daily sustenance from the land, forests, and waters understood that their survival was directly dependent on their capacity to defend their homelands. When their homelands and the beings who inhabited their homelands were threatened, they acutely felt the severe repercussions. This was one tactic the colonial powers used to subjugate our populations. For example, when the invaders exterminated millions of buffalo on the western prairies, Indigenous populations began to starve and many took up arms to attempt to defend their territories from further attack and harm. They fought until the costs seemed too great to bear. Consequently, Indigenous populations became increasingly dependent on the government for rations and this drew hunting

populations to the military forts where rations were often distributed. Colonial governments worked systematically to break our ancestors' connections to our homelands.

This disconnect was key to the process of colonization. In fact, I believe that the systematic disconnection (and dispossession) of Indigenous Peoples from our homelands is the defining characteristic of colonization. An eloquent and insightful explanation of this process comes from Harriet Nahanee, a Nuu-chah-nulth environmental activist and Canadian residential school survivor. She embodied Indigenous strength, resiliency, and courageous commitment to truth-telling and justice. Her observations about the purpose of the residential school system (which also applies to the US boarding school system) speak directly to this issue of disconnection: "We were the Keepers of the Land; that is the special job given to our people by the Creator. And the whites wanted the land, the trees and the fish. So they had to brainwash us to forget we had to guard and preserve the land for our Creator. That's why they put us in the residential schools, and terrorized us, so we'd forget our language and our laws, and allow the land to be stolen. And it worked. The whites have 99% of the land now, and our people are dying off. That's why it's never been about God, or 'civilizing' us. It's always been about the land" (Annett, 2002, p. 66). Our disconnection facilitates colonial exploitation.

With decreasing militant resistance and increasing disconnection from the way of life enjoyed by our ancestors, we have experienced an accompanying shift in loyalties. For example, in the late 1980s when gaming was introduced to our communities as a viable means of economic development, it was hailed as "the new buffalo" because it provided a single source of revenue that could provide for all the basic needs of our people, just as the bison did for Plains Peoples prior to their near annihilation. And, certainly some of the Indigenous communities with thriving casinos and bingo businesses have experienced a reprieve from the hunger and destitution of previous generations under colonial rule. In general, however, Indian gaming is a poor substitute for the bison. In addition to ignoring the spiritual and kinship relationship Indigenous Peoples maintained with the Buffalo People, the phrase "the new buffalo" also denies the connection to land and life inherent in not just hunting traditions, but any way of life in which people draw their sustenance directly from the land. The shift to a gaming-dependent economy also required a practical shift in how gaming communities relate to the landbase. Gaming communities, for example, will utilize their newfound financial and political leverage to fervently protect Indian gaming from any outside threat—that is, major efforts are initiated to protect the institution that is now seen as the source of livelihood and wellbeing. It means that tribal leadership, with the support of the population, is also committed to supporting and maintaining the systems and institutions that these gambling ventures require (including the existing oil-dependent infrastructure, capitalism, and the state apparatus that supports the Indian monopoly on high-stakes gaming in most states). At the same time, many Indigenous people from gaming communities continue to espouse beautiful rhetoric about cherishing the earth, treating the earth as mother, and living in balance with all of creation. It is not that our people are reciting teachings in which they do not believe. Intellectually, we understand the importance of the values and teachings that sustained our ancestors, but our experience suggests a different set

of values that undermines our capacity and willingness to engage activities that might threaten the status quo. As the Jensen quote articulated, our practical experience dictates that we must defend what we recognize as the source of our food—the gaming industry.

Similar issues exist wherever Indigenous nations sit atop “resources” that governments and corporations seek to exploit, whether it is through mining, drilling, plowing, or de-forestation. Perhaps the tension between Indigenous values and resource exploitation may best be seen in the corporate and governmental attempts to make as much money as possible while prolonging fossil fuel dependence through some of the most environmentally-destructive extraction processes in human history. This is particularly pronounced in the Alberta Tar Sands, appropriately dubbed the “World’s Dirtiest Oil.” Not only does extracting oil from the Tar Sands require the wholesale destruction of boreal forest and the peat and soil below it, the process of stripping the bitumen from the sand is also heavily dependent upon natural gas. In addition, to produce this synthetic crude, 2-4.5 barrels of fresh water are used to extract the oil, producing contaminated water that is then dumped into toxic tailings ponds. Analysts estimate that as a consequence of the tailings lagoons, at least a billion gallons of contaminated water are leached into the environment every year (*Dirty Oil Sands*, 2012). That number is likely to increase significantly as Tar Sands destruction expands.

In this race to exploit every last resource, Indigenous communities are confronted with painful choices. Jim Boucher, a Chipewyan from Fort McKay First Nation in northern Alberta, comes from a community that initially spent years resisting Tar Sands extraction. The community has long-since abandoned that struggle and decided that if they cannot beat the corporations, they will join them. In 2008, as chief of that First Nation and head of the Fort McKay Group of Companies that provides services to the Tar Sands industry, Boucher told a *National Geographic* reporter “The choice we make is a difficult one...Now we're trying to develop the community's capacity to take advantage of the opportunity.” The allure of monetary benefits from resource extraction industries was too great to resist—so much so that Fort McKay has even considered opening its own mine (*Kunzig*, 2009).

The story is repeated throughout Indigenous homelands as companies prey on the vulnerability created by the hardship of poverty. Enbridge, for example, targets Indigenous individuals for cooptation into the business of expanding and entrenching North America’s energy infrastructure deeper into Indigenous territories. The section of their website devoted to “Aboriginal Communities” displays three kindly-looking and smiling Aboriginal grandmothers welcoming viewers to the webpage. In lending their images, they are endorsing the Enbridge vision for Indigenous lands and resources and embracing the Enbridge efforts to appeal to the capitalist segment of Indigenous societies, to the detriment of Indigenous homelands and the Indigenous people who seek to defend them. The Enbridge goal is to “create opportunities that are aligned with the aspirations of many of the people within Aboriginal and Native American communities” (*Enbridge*, 2012). With promises of job training, education, and services, Indigenous people are baited into abandoning the struggle to defend the land and to actually participate in or help facilitate the destruction. As land defender Enei Begaye (Navajo) has said,

“The crux of the problem is that the majority of jobs available to Native people provide no dignity. The jobs are counter to our cultural and spiritual connections to the earth and force us, as Winona LaDuke says, ‘to cannibalize our own mother in order to live’ (Shilling, 2011, p. 100). Lana Lowe, land manager for Fort Nelson First Nation in northeastern B.C., has described the tension between jobs in the fracking industry and the desire to protect their homelands: “[E]verybody in the community who wants to work or is able to work is working as long as they’re willing to buy into the industry safety standards and cultures, but I mean, when it comes down to socioeconomic impacts and the ability to live our traditional life as Dene people...I’m not saying going back to a tent and live 40 below, but I’m saying being able to go out on the land and hunt and fish and teach the values and the skills to younger generations. Those opportunities are becoming smaller and smaller...You can’t go out on the land anymore without running into somebody from Apache or EnCana or Imperial Oil or one of the big companies...Wildlife is harder to find. Moose is harder to find, and rabbits and the beaver. Boreal caribou. They’re threatened species, and their habitat is quickly disappearing. It’s just changing everything” (Holman, 2012).

These concrete ramifications of extractive industries demonstrate why it is imperative for Indigenous Peoples to resist them. Yet, as the possibility of finding sustenance from the land decreases with threats to habitat and eco-systems, and workers become increasingly dependent on industry, the will to resist them simultaneously decreases. Thus, embedded in this tension is a feedback loop. Individuals who participate in extractive industries become dependent on the income from their jobs in securing their own survival, and they become increasingly invested in defending the industries as a consequence. It is not that their food is any less reliant on the land, forests, and waters, but it is that they are now disconnected from their direct source of food. While disconnection was always an aspect of the colonial project, in the context of global crises, it is particularly troubling.

This is precisely the time when Indigenous people must vigorously maintain, resume, and defend the sustainable ways of being that allowed our ancestors to exist on the same lands over thousands of years. In today’s context, for those of us who have faced disconnection, it is crucial that we re-institute land practices that re-connect us with our lands, that direct us back to our food sources, and that allow us to actively protect and defend the remaining integrity of our homelands as well as take action to restore lost integrity. A feedback loop is also embedded here; the more we learn to restore local food practices, the more likely we are to defend those practices, and the stronger our cultural ties to our homeland become. If we choose this course of action, we can simultaneously engage both the resurgence and resistance elements of a decolonization movement. Our survival will depend on it.

Challenging the fallacies

For more than half a century, scholars have warned of coming dangers that would challenge the very foundation of modern society. In 1956 Marion King Hubbert coined the concept of peak oil

and demonstrated that petroleum extraction could be plotted on a graph in which the maximum point of extraction was the peak on a bell curve, followed by a steady decline. In 1968 Paul Erlich published *The Population Bomb*, which warned of catastrophic mass death and starvation if population growth was not brought under control. Another study, *Limits to Growth*, a project commissioned by the Club of Rome and published in 1972, examined the potential effects of exponential growth on a finite planet and warned of collapse if we continued on the current trajectory. Similarly, in 1980 William Catton published *Overshoot*, which he explained as growth beyond an area's carrying capacity that will eventually lead to a crash. Indigenous intellectual Vine Deloria, Jr. characterized *Overshoot* as one of the most important books he had read in his lifetime.

Indigenous people from every generation since the time of invasion have delivered warnings to the invading culture about their destructive practices and we would be hard-pressed to find an Indigenous nation whose people and homelands have not already experienced extraordinary devastation and loss. Still, as industrialization intensified through the twentieth century, the rapidity, magnitude, and efficiency of the destruction also intensified and Indigenous people continued to issue distress signals. Deloria, for example, understood the inherent unsustainability of the colonizer's ways and he wrote volumes about the clashes in worldviews and cosmologies at the root of Indigenous-settler conflict. In his classic work, *God Is Red*, now four-decades old, Deloria defended the wisdom and sophistication of Indigenous spirituality in contrast to Christianity and contemplated what was required to shift society away from this disastrous trajectory: "The imminent and expected destruction of the life cycle of world ecology can be prevented by a radical shift in outlook from our present naïve conception of this world as a testing ground to a more mature view of the universe as a comprehensive matrix of life forms." He went on to point out that "Making this shift in viewpoint is essentially religious, not economic or political" (Deloria, 1973, p. 290). This was precisely Forbes' concern as he lamented the de-sanctification of the earth.

In 1977 Haudenosaunee elders delivered powerful messages at the United Nations that would later be published as *A Basic Call to Consciousness*, clearly warning of impending danger: "Today, man is facing the very survival of the human species. The way of life known as 'Western Civilization' is on a death path and its culture has no viable answers. When faced with the reality of its own destructiveness, Western civilization can only go forward into areas of more efficient destruction...Our essential message to the world is a basic call to consciousness. The destruction of Native cultures and people is the same process which has destroyed and is destroying life on this planet. The technologies and social systems that have destroyed the animals and the plant life are also destroying the Native people. And that process is Western civilization" (Akwasasne Notes, 2005, p. 90). Hopi traditional leader Thomas Banyacya consistently conveyed a similar message through the second half of the twentieth century. Since shortly after World War II, he traveled the world delivering a warning about the need to move from the path of destruction to the path of spiritual balance and harmony before it is too late

(Ewen & NACNYC, 1994, p. 117). In the interest of saving the planet, he continued to deliver his message about Hopi prophecy until his death in 1999.

Yet, in spite of compelling warnings from Indigenous leaders and in spite of the irrefutable destructiveness of settler ways, the colonial narrative still suggests that answers to our current problems will only be found in greater and more sophisticated technologies, more resource exploitation, and more “development.” These are just some of the fallacies imposed on Indigenous Peoples by colonial society.

One of the most pernicious aspects of every colonial power is its capacity to shape perceptions of reality. This is essential to maintaining consistent control over a subjugated population. Kenyan intellectual Ngugi wa Thiong’o describes how hegemonic classes work to reinforce their control and to break any resistance. They seek “to construct a picture of the universe which bolsters their conception of their place and role in society and in the universe; their conception of the place and the role of all other people in that universe; and furthermore they will try to sell, by every ideological, educational, and cultural means at their disposal, that picture as eternal, unchanging truth about the nature of the universe” (wa Thiong’o, 1993, p. 129). One facet of the colonial picture is an illusion of permanency and inevitability. For example, “French colonialism in Algeria has always developed on the assumption that it would last forever,” wrote Frantz Fanon. “The structures built, the port facilities, the airdromes, the prohibition of the Arab language, often gave the impression that the enemy committed himself, compromised himself, half lost himself in his prey, precisely to make any future break, any separation, impossible. Every manifestation of the French presence expressed a continuous rooting in time and in the Algerian future, and could always be read as a token of an indefinite oppression” (Fanon, 1965, p. 179-180). Perhaps nowhere has this sense of permanency and inevitability been more powerful than in the United States, which has sought to project the image as the world’s greatest and last superpower. That so few Americans and Indigenous people living within the borders of the US can conceive of a declining or collapsing US is evidence of the power of this colonial-constructed portraiture and its hold on colonizer and colonized alike.

Even the lessons of history and logic do not mar this fabricated image. Who in this society has not learned of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire? Given that Western Civilization traces its roots to the Roman Empire, so too may the roots of American exceptionalism be traced to Roman preeminence. At the height of the Roman Empire, both Romans and those whom they conquered would have had difficulty imagining its demise. Like Americans today, the Romans were famous for their arrogance and a belief in their invulnerability. Their military prowess and might allowed them to maintain the illusion of permanency. Still, the empire fell, or at least steadily declined over a period of several centuries. Today, the warning signs of the collapse of American Empire surround us: the levels of unsustainable debt and the devaluing of the American dollar point to economic insolvency; we have entered the down-slope of oil extraction and the only hope for prolonging industrial civilization is based in horrendously destructive fossil fuel extraction processes like fracking and Tar Sands exploitation; and, the effects of global climate change are already playing out in catastrophic ways, demonstrating the absurdity

of maintaining a way of life that is leading us on a suicidal path. Some evidence suggests that it may already be too late to effectively mitigate the worst effects of climate change. Meanwhile, the global human population has topped seven billion in a moment in which we are also facing critical food shortages. Drought and other climate-change induced natural disasters, destruction of top-soil through industrial mono-crop agriculture, warfare, and investment in food crops as biofuels, have all reduced the amount of food available to support the expanding population. American decline, and the decline of industrial civilization, has already begun. As Indigenous Peoples, it is essential that we understand the direness of the global situation, recognize the fallacy of industrial civilization's invulnerability, and begin to imagine a future beyond empire and beyond the colonial nation-states that have kept us subjugated.

Indigenous knowledge of resilience

Vandana Shiva (2008) has discussed what she dubs the "triple crisis" of climate crisis, peak oil, and the food crisis. She, too, argues for the distinctiveness of our current predicament explaining: "While wide-ranging wars, colonial expansion, and slavery—among other things—have long resulted in human-generated misery and destruction, never before have the actions of one part of humanity threatened the existence of the entire human species" (p. 2). To address these crises, Shiva offers a two-step solution that involves both *powering down* our energy and resource consumption and *powering up* "the creative, productive human energy and collective democratic energy to make the necessary transition" (Shiva, 2008, p. 4). She persuasively argues that our survival will be rooted in our capacity to shift to a fossil-free future as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, as Shiva also points out, the wealthy view the current crises quite differently than the poor, the marginalized, and the colonized: "From the perspective of the rich, the problem needing to be solved is how to control the world's oil supply (through militarization) while simultaneously finding alternatives to oil before the oil runs out, and before climate change disrupts the current social order" (Shiva, 2008, p. 42). Rather than seeking solutions outside the paradigm that created the current crises, the elite attempt to protect the existing system, even at the expense of the rest of creation.

In this context, the paradigm we need is the Indigenous paradigm based on sustainability. Not the kind of sustainability that is tossed around in corporate or governmental discussions of "sustainable development," but the kind of sustainability that allows a human population to live on the same landbase for thousands of years without destroying it. This requires us to challenge the fallacy of the superiority of Western society. There is no long-term future in fossil-fuel dependency, and all aspects of industrial civilization may be considered fossil-fuel dependent. When the oil goes, so too will this civilization. Rather than conceptualizing the restoration of fossil-fuel free lifestyle as a step backwards, Indigenous teachings would more accurately characterize this as a restoration of balance. However, because many Indigenous people have been effectively indoctrinated in the ideologies of colonial permanency or inevitability, or now are invested in maintaining the corporate and industrial systems that provide their food, they

might choose to put their energies in defending the status quo, even if it means going down with a sinking ship. Other Indigenous people will, no doubt, fight to defend what is left of our homelands and seek to restore the ways of our ancestors.

On January 4, 2005, NBC news ran a story with the headline, “Stone Age cultures survive tsunami waves: Indian islanders apparently heeded ancient lore” (Misra, 2005). The news story appeared with an accompanying photo of a Sentilinese man standing on the beach shooting at a helicopter with his bow and arrow. The Indian coast guard helicopter was flying over the Indian Andaman and Nicobar islands to survey Tsunami damage several days after that devastating natural disaster. The article reported that government officials and anthropologists believe that “ancient knowledge of the movement of wind, sea, and birds” may have saved the five Indigenous tribes from the Indian archipelago from the worst effects of that tsunami.



Figure 1 Indian Coast Guard / AP

The Sentilinese have protected their coral-reef ringed island from government presence and have routinely shot at invaders to keep them away. While their population is only several hundred strong, they have successfully maintained their lifestyle and relationship to the land and sea. They exist in the modern world, in part because their lands are now protected more from outside influences. In spite of this success, the rest of the world conveyed its bewilderment of their survival with additional headlines about the Peoples “frozen in the Paleolithic past.” It is difficult for stunned Westerners to understand why Indigenous Peoples would choose to maintain land-based lifestyles over participation in industrial civilization. Some might first suspect that these peoples simply have not experienced the superiority of the modern world—that is, they would surely choose to live with all the conveniences of the twenty-first century if only they were exposed to modern culture. However, in the case of the Sentilinese, we know this is not true. Tribal members have spent considerable time in Port Blair in the Indian-Administered territory. The Indigenous Peoples of both the Andaman and Nicobar islands have had extensive contact with outsiders since the time of Marco Polo, suffering slave raiding into the second half of the twentieth century. The government, however, eventually banned interaction with the tribe, largely because previous contact resulted in alcoholism, disease, and sexual exploitation of their women. The population has largely decided that they prefer their lifestyle to what is offered by the world of industrialism and capitalism. An illustrative example of this rejection of modern culture is that of En-Mai, a Jarawan teenager who spent time in Port Blair in 1996 to heal a broken-leg injury. While there, he was indistinguishable from the other urban youth, donning a t-shirt, jeans, and a reversed baseball cap. When his leg healed, however, he shirked those clothes and ways and returned to his island and way of life. Interestingly, his people announced after the Tsunami that all 250 of them survived. They are a population anthropologists have traced back 70,000 years.

I use this example to illustrate the relevancy of Indigenous knowledge in today's world. Indeed, in the era of global climate chaos, those populations able to read nature's warning signs may be the ones with the greatest chances of long-term survival—at least to a point. If, for example, sea levels rise enough to threaten their island home, traditional knowledge will not be enough to save the island population. But, this story also suggests that it is adherence to Indigenous ways of being that fosters the love of land enough to fight for it, no matter the potential cost. Vine Deloria wrote, "Adherence to tradition means that the fundamental sets of the historic relationships—with the land, with the animals and birds, and with the larger cosmos—become the defining boundaries within which the people find their being" (Deloria, 1999, p. 269-70). Our connection to the plants and animals, and our relationship to the larger cosmos are, obviously, dependent upon our access to the land. Do we love our lands and our ways enough to fight for them?

While it would be wonderful to put all our energies into the revitalization of Indigenous ways of being, any attempts to try are quickly checked by our colonial reality. Global climate change alone disallows us from isolating ourselves and practicing Indigenous ways of being. Further, most of us face corporate and governmental threats as the world's last remaining resources are targeted for exploitation. If our waters are undrinkable, our forests destroyed, our lands rendered toxic, how do we practice Indigenous ways of being? That our Peoples' voices of opposition are still treated as only minor inconveniences or obstacles to be overcome is an indication of the ongoing colonial relationship. Colonial governments continue to work hand-in-hand with corporations and extractive industries to draw their wealth and power from Indigenous lands. Our survival as distinct, land-based Peoples will require us to recover our traditional knowledge; it is there we will find the basis of our resiliency, while simultaneously challenging the threats to our homelands. It is in our best interest to work to stop the colonial, industrial machine.

Recognizing the paradox

When writing about the destructiveness of the invading society, Jack Forbes (2008) did not foresee a positive future given this society's current trajectory: "A 'machievellian' mass society valuing wealth-acquisition and typified by exploitative relations must, inevitably, be a violent society, using force to protect the 'haves' and the 'hope to haves' from the 'have nots' and outsiders. Such a society will destroy itself and even its own people. No self-restraints can effectively be imposed because the society's very nature, its internal dynamic, is to consume. Its voracious appetite will cause it literally to eat itself. When sufficiently weakened, other similar social monsters will finish it off—if anything remains" (p. 163-64). His critique is important and highlights the nature of the paradox we face today. In the destructiveness and unsustainability of the rapacious culture that invaded and colonized the Western hemisphere, we are witnessing its cannibalistic nature as well as its capacity for self-destruction. Indigenous Peoples have been waiting more than five centuries for the steam to run out on this runaway train. As empire

collapses, we will have renewed opportunities to break the colonial bonds and reclaim our homelands and ways of life. But, the question is, how much of the planet will be left?

While the planet has survived radical changes in the past, and human, animal, and plant communities have faced crises before, with worsening global warming and corporate exploitation, we are talking about a rate of animal and plant extinction that has not been seen in 65 million years. “There are 10 to 30 million plant and animal species on the planet, most of them unidentified. Each year as many as 50,000 species disappear (at current rates)” (Olson, 2005). If we continue on the current pathway and the effects of global warming intensify, the rate of extinction will only increase.

As NASA scientist James Hansen has written (Hansen is best known for testifying before Congress about global warming in the 1980s), “The urgency of the situation crystallized only in the past few years. We now have clear evidence of the crisis...The startling conclusion is that continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself—and the timetable is shorter than we thought.” He discusses the significance of “amplifying feedbacks” which feed off of one another in complex ways and determine the magnitude of climate change (Hansen, 2009, ix, p. 42). Some of these feedbacks include loss of Arctic sea ice, melting ice sheets and glaciers, and the release of frozen methane as tundra melts. For example, in the December 2011 issue of the journal *Nature*, experts warned that carbon from thawing permafrost in the Arctic “will be released more quickly than models suggest, and at levels that are cause for serious concern” (Abbott & Schuur, 2011)ⁱⁱ The carbon released will contribute to global warming, which will contribute to additional carbon release. Also in December 2011, Russian scientists reported seeing seeping structures, more than 1,000 meters in diameter, releasing plumes of methane, which is twenty times more potent than carbon dioxide, exceeding scientists’ fears. In a small area they observed more than 100 of them, suggesting that there must now be thousands of them in the Arctic.

Scientists estimate that there are hundreds of millions of tons of methane gas locked away beneath the Arctic permafrost, which extends from the mainland into the seabed of the relatively shallow sea of the East Siberian Arctic Shelf...as the permafrost melts, the trapped methane could be suddenly released into the atmosphere leading to rapid and severe climate change. (Connor, 2011)

In addition, the rate of ocean acidification due to global warming is occurring ten times faster than in the geologic past. The last time this kind of acidification occurred there was a mass extinction of marine species 55 million years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ That acidification rates are faster now spells an ecological marine disaster that is almost incomprehensible.

With these kinds of impending crises and the stakes so high, it is no wonder that Indigenous Peoples are renewing their commitments to protect their homelands from further destruction. As the threats to Indigenous lives and lands increase, so too does the language of resistance. When Taseko Mines Ltd. proposed a copper and gold mine in the interior of British

Columbia, the six-band Tsilhqot'in Nation opposed it with backing from the Assembly of First Nations and the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. Chief Marilyn Baptiste told reporters at a news conference, "As one of my elders had said when we were going through the panel hearings—she will be there on the road in her wheelchair. She will have her shotguns and she will not move." She went on to say "We are willing to sacrifice our lives. I am willing to sacrifice my life for the sake of saving our lands and our future generations" (Curry & Stueck, 2010).^{iv}

Similarly, in response to Enbridge's Northern Gateway Pipelines Project, 61 British Columbia bands signed a declaration of opposition to it. Chief Jackie Thomas of the Saik'uz First Nation replied: "Our nations stand united as never before to protect the Fraser River and the Salmon." Chief Larry Nooski of Nadleh Whut'en First Nation said, "We will do what it takes to protect our land, our salmon, our rivers. Just watch us" (Hume, 2010). The corporations will not stop their exploitation voluntarily. Even with huge environmental costs, they will not alter their course. Their purpose is to draw wealth from the land. In studying the potential economic threats posed by the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline in the US, Cornell University economists revealed that the pipeline could actually have a negative impact on jobs because of likely oil spills. They found that because Tar Sands oil is heavier and more corrosive than conventional crude, it is three times likelier to spill. Given the high incidence of pipeline spills (600 spills occurred in 2011 alone), they reported that "There's no question this pipeline will spill—it's a question of when" (Battistoni, 2012). Spills or ruptures could toxify the lands and waters so thoroughly that they would become inhabitable, as happened in Kalamazoo, Michigan when an Enbridge pipeline ruptured in 2010.

In March 2012, Lakota people at Pine Ridge blockaded trucks carrying Keystone Pipeline material and prevented them from entering reservation lands. Pine Ridge has opposed the proposed Keystone XL pipeline because of potential contamination of both surface water and the Ogllala Aquifer, but as Debra White Plume explained, they also "oppose the tar sands oil mine in solidarity with Mother Earth and our First Nation allies" (Ward, 2012). Marie Randall, a 92-year old grandmother was part of the blockade. She reminded the young ones there about their obligation to defend the land: "I am 92 years old. How much longer am I going to be saying, 'This is your foundation, *takoza* [grandchild]. You protect it. You are all Lakotas—stand up for your rights!'"

In opposition to the Pacific Trails Pipeline, a natural gas pipeline that would run from Summit Lake near Prince George, B.C. to Kitimat, Wet'suwet'en people are preparing for the defense of their territory. In 2010, Hagwilakw, a Wet'suwet'en elder, delivered a "trespass feather" to Enbridge along with the clear declaration: "THERE WILL BE NO PIPELINES IN OUR TERRITORIES" (Redwire Media, 2012). They intend to protect their territory against any further destruction. In February 2012, Toghestiy, a Wet'suwet'en leader of resistance, stated "We'll protect our lands, right to our last breath" (Vancouver Media Co-op, 2012).

In September 2011, women from the Blood Nation courageously parked in front of Murphy Oil's fracking development site and vowed not to move until plans for oil and gas fracking were stopped. The three women arrested (ironically, by Blood tribal police) were Lois

Frank, Jill Crop Eared Wolf, and Elle-Maija Tailfeathers. In a subsequent statement, Tailfeathers eloquently illuminated the connection between Indigenous people and our homelands, and what is at stake if we do not fulfill our obligations to protect them:

I do not feel as though what we did was heroic. We were a handful of people, including a couple of children, who gathered for a common purpose; to prevent any further desecration of the land. For us, this place is more than just land; it is the place that has given life to our people since time immemorial. Our culture, our language, our identity comes from the land and it is to the land that we owe our very existence. This knowledge is something that our ancestors have passed on from the beginning; this land is our mother and we must always respect that. So when I say that I do not feel that what we did was heroic, I mean that we were just doing the right thing. It is important to understand our actions were not rooted in politics because this issue is more than just politics; it is about doing the right thing. I don't think in any of our hearts, and I mean the collective "we", that there is any denying what the right thing to do is. This earth is all we have. It is just that simple. Without it, there is no 'us' and there is no 'we.' (Tailfeathers, 2011)

What we face now are the death throes of colonial empire. Like a rabid animal that, when cornered, strikes out in mad desperation, so too will colonial governments and their corporate accomplices make desperate dashes to cash-in on whatever last bits of wealth might yet be extracted, however harmfully, from our homelands. If we can stop any further destruction, decreasing fossil fuels will begin to grind industrial civilization to a halt. The end of the fossil-fuel era allows for the possibility of the return of a land-based existence, one in which we restore our relationships with other beings in our homeland and fulfill our obligations as Original Peoples. If we ground our defense of our homelands in that traditional knowledge, we may use whatever momentum we gain from the protection of our territories to proactively reclaim them more broadly. We need to defend all we can, as quickly as we can. As species continue to fall into extinction every day, eco-systems reach their threshold of tolerance, and CO2 emissions continue to rise, we find ourselves in a position where if we do not stop Western Civilization soon, our chance at survival becomes less and less likely. The paradox of the end of empire is that while we have an opportunity to realize its emancipatory potential, if we do not succeed soon, the chances for the survival of all life will severely diminish.

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ⁱ I have written about much of this destruction in *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (2008), Chapter 4.

ⁱⁱ See: [Arctic Temperatures Continue Rapid Rise as 2011 Breaks Record Set in 2010](#) By Climate Guest Blogger on Jan 23, 2012 at 7:27 pm, Record Ice Loss and Tundra Melt Amplify Warming Feedbacks, by Nick Sundt, reposted from the [World Wildlife Fund](#). In addition to calling for better data, observations and research, they said that their research “*underscores the urgent need to reduce atmospheric emissions from fossil-fuel use and deforestation. This will help to keep permafrost carbon frozen in the ground.*”

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.bris.ac.uk/news/2010/6835.html> and <http://thinkprogress.org/romm/2010/02/18/205525/ocean-acidification-study-mass-extinction-of-marine-life-nature-geoscience/> for more information, retrieved April 7, 2012.

^{iv} Thanks to Jeremy Pahl for sharing this example of resistance with me.