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Sustaining Our Communities Through Care and Action: An Exploration of Indigenous, Feminist Environmental Care Ethics

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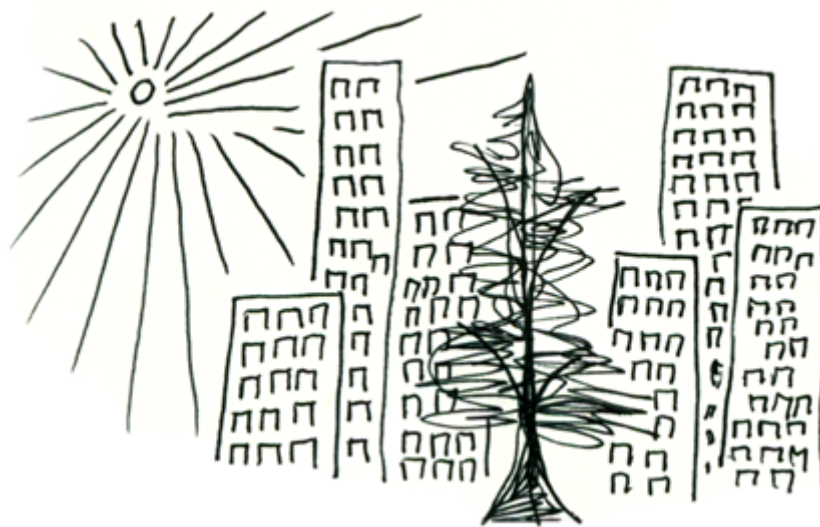
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Sustaining Our Communities Through Care and Action:
An Exploration of Indigenous, Feminist Environmental Care Ethics

Kate Rayner Fried

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Introduction

The rain is falling heavily outside of my apartment, as it has been all day. I am ready for it to be sunny and summery, tired of the dark, wet winter. I know the rains mean less intensive wildfires to come this summer, and that this year will almost certainly another catastrophic year of smoke and haze and flames. I know that climate change is increasingly contributing to conditions that allow massive, unprecedented fire complexes, soon to be common. I try to be grateful for the rain, ground myself in the flowering salmonberry and thimbleberry I saw in my walk in the woods the other day, food for hummingbirds both endemic and encroaching (Hill, Sargent R. & Sargent M., 1998). Like many people in the Pacific Northwest, the lack of vitamin D in the winter is always felt strongly in my body and mind. Some remnant of fear that the dreary dark is here again prevents me from fully appreciating the falling rain.

Later, I step outside into the refreshing downpour, the cool post-pink-sunset night air gives me relief from the monotony of productivity seemingly endless papers and assigned readings--a product of neoliberal higher education. My position as a student is both an incredible privilege and a destructive and dehumanizing experience. I have found healing here, moments of joy, too. The enveloping darkness outside seems to slow time, allowing me to step out of my frantic pace for a moment, to rest. I'm still not used to the climate in Bellingham, despite the four years I've spent living here. Despite the way that some of my formative years, my entire higher education experience, is intrinsically tied to the this land, it's history and the changes we are experiencing within.

I feel a sense of disconnection with the land here , a lack of familiarity, a lack of prioritizing my relationship to it. I spend so much time inside, working on assignments, sitting in classes, sleeping, scrolling through instagram. I feel unmoored, confused about my place in the world, my work. My impending graduation, the end of my apartment lease in August, and after that my empty, yawning calendar exacerbate my aimlessness, my anxiety. I think tomorrow, even if it is raining, I will walk barefoot on the grass, press my feet into the ground, feel it push back.

I write this because it is important to contextualize the life I live as a I write this, as I pull together the threads of what I think I know, learnings that will deepen over time. I know that as I prepare to leave Bellingham I need to consider my own relationship to place and land and people. I learn on land that the Lummi, Nooksack, and other Coast Salish peoples have, since time immemorial, cultivated and coexisted with (Deur, 2015). I remember when I first moved

here, how striking the mosses and the green vegetation were. Now, when I fly on a jet plane back to Colorado it looks so dry, so brown, so unlike what I have come to know. Still, when I make my way out to my favorite spots: the river, the reservoir, the cabin in the woods, I feel a pull or familiarity. This land and I, we go back farther, we remember each other.

Still, remembering is not the same as reciprocating love, as caring for. As I walk through the neighborhood named for the meadows that are no longer there, lie in the grass in the backyard, scramble over rocks and tall grasses in the mountains, I question what it means to be living on colonized land, to be living and loving land that is owned by my parents and grandparents. I know based on my research that the Ute, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota people all have historic relationships to this place I am from. I know that they have been systematically erased and invisibilized from the landscape, removed to reservations elsewhere, though I couldn't tell you where. I'm not sure I've ever met anyone who claims this ancestry, a purposeful ignorance.

I wonder where I will go next. I would like to put down roots, to invest myself somewhere, stick around for the hard conversations and contribute to a shared sense of place. Maybe I will move to the East Coast, maybe I will move to a city. I've always lived in the west, always thought that I wasn't a city person. But I know there are generations of Brooklynites in my blood who found a place to build a family, away from the pogroms in the old country. I know, too that there are generations of Coloradans in my blood, drawn to that tall prairie grass, the hills where the mountains and the plains meet. I have to reckon with this history of colonization, square it with the refuge my ancestors found here, become comfortable with diaspora and embrace homeland wherever I come to be

I write this because I am continuing the process of questioning and processing the history of the land I am on, and my relationship to it. The culmination of this project is in Bellingham, a goodbye gift to the academic life I've immersed in here, but it has been shaped by growing up in Fort Collins, by visiting my Grandma in New Jersey, by road tripping through Utah. This project shifted through presenting in Pittsburg, on Haudenosaunee and Osage land, and continued evolving in Seattle where the Duwamish still live, unrecognized by the US federal government but very much alive.

Situated in these contexts of place I am grateful to have learned from countless conversations in classes designed to foster critical thinking, over dinners with classmates and

friends, on walks home with roommates, in listening to the shared knowledge of those around me. I am grateful for the ways I have been prompted to care more deeply for those around me and allow myself to be cared for, to develop relationships rooted in understandings of the radical nature of interpersonal care and love. In citing the relationships that I have to particular places, ecological and social communities, and landscapes I am naming and bringing attention to the histories and connections that have brought me to the understanding of environmental work and care ethics that I uncover here.

Indigenous, feminist, and indigenous feminist ethics of care, then expanded into black feminist and women of color feminist relational ethics, provide a vantage point to see through neoliberal, patriarchal, and white supremacist understandings of environmentalism and environmental harm that dominate the environmental movement. Focusing on ethics of care and indigenous feminist ways of knowing that center reciprocal relationship building, love and accountability as a healing act, and that provide a path forward is key to addressing and moving past the current state of environmental despair and chaos.

Through the Environmental Justice movement--particularly notions of procedural justice and community agency--and other radical imaginaries we can construct alternative ways of addressing the root causes of environmental harm and exploitation. Oppressive systems including white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism must be grappled with in order to address systems of inequality including environmental injustices. A deeper understanding of place, of the interconnectedness of humans and nature, and of indigenous and feminist ways of knowing, therefore, provides a necessary foil to the increasingly individualistic, neoliberal, commodified and shallow conceptions of addressing environmental harm that we are saddled with today.

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Shifting Views of Sustainability and Environmentalism

Historic understandings of the environmental movement generally place the start of mobilizing around environmental issues somewhere around the first Earth Day in the 70s, arising out of conflicting ideologies of conservation and preservation championed by white settler men such as Gifford Pinchot and John Muir (Robbins, Hintz, & Moore, 2014, p. 70). This timeline concretizes the colonization of the Americas as the roots of environmentalism, and defines the relationship to land in a very particular way. While there are relevant and important differences

between these ideologies, both focus on the proper use (or non-use) of land, and presume that the land and ecosystem itself are objects in which human desires and ethics can be acted upon (ibid).

Similarly, other ethics and ideologies that evolve out of these understandings build on this fundamentally flawed foundation. For example, Aldo Leopold's land ethic seemingly addresses this issue by positioning the land and ecosystem itself as something that has agency. Leopold contextualizes humanity as merely a part of the ecosystem, disrupting the common trope of humans as separate from nature (Cronon, 1996, p. 11). Even further, the relationship between humans and the larger environment is one that is interdependent and connected, an important departure from previous white environmentalism. This clearly resonates with the ethic of care doctrine that forms the foundation of indigenous feminist relationships to land and to each other, ethics which far predate the colonization of the Americas and the writing of *A Sand County Almanac* by Leopold (Robbins, Hintz, & Moore, 2014, p 72).

To many environmentalists the land ethic is still incredibly powerful and resonant, and it provides some entry point into thinking about our relationship to land in a different way. Using the land ethic, ethically moral choices are those which tend to preserve the ecological community in the long term, an ecocentric view that certainly begins to disrupt ideas about nature existing for human use (Robbins, Hintz, & Moore, 2014, p.74). However, in my view, this ethic falls short in that land and ecology is still largely treated as aseptic, without history and larger systems acting upon it. Missing in this analysis is the systems of oppression and exploitation, and relatedly the lack of relationships and communities we build with each other, that disrupt the preservation of the eco-social community in the first place. Choices about what is ecologically beneficial and therefore moral are largely personal and individual choices, rather than part of a more complex and power-laden system that structures our actions and choices communally. The disconnect between people and environment might be mentioned, but no remedy is put forward and no way to understand this rift as a product of history, not a product of human nature (Seawright, 2014).

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Settler Environmentalism

In this way we can see that the dominant environmental movement as it is currently constructed is far from neutral. On the contrary, the frameworks that underlie the dominant white environmental movement are operating very specifically on a framework of settler

environmentalism in which the history of indigenous relationships with place are actively invisibilized and erased in favor of a more palatable, and ultimately ineffective environmentalism (Seawright, 2014). In fact, the rift, according to Gardner, between particular people and the environment as it exists is a part of a larger process of colonization where in “western epistemology...has come to be seen as placeless” (Gardner, in Seawright, 2014). This Western, colonial understanding of place, or more accurately placelessness, is not neutral or a natural function of humanity, but is part of a tradition that is learned generationally wherein conceptions of self and place as disconnected are part of a larger framework (ibid).

We see this settler environmentalism and conception of place operating on many levels, deeply embedded in the way we think about land, environmental protection, and our relationships to place. Educational frameworks, both in traditional schooling contexts and in dominant environmental education and other alternative frameworks, continually assert the foundational ideas that there is a natural “drive to appropriate nature, accumulate property, and cultivate” (Seawright, 2014). This is further complicated by gendered and racialized notions of “delimiting who can own, what can be owned, and how things should be owned” (ibid). We see this play out globally, in the free market epistemologies that have led to increasingly massive and technologically complex industrial agriculture and food production. Furthermore, historical forces that continue to this day such as slavery, rely on the “perception of non-white peoples as animals,” and therefore inherently devalued beings (ibid).

In some contexts this natural drive to appropriate is framed positively, in other contexts, such as in hegemonic environmental discourses, this drive is to be resisted. Neither framing questions that there is a ‘natural’ drive to conquer in the first place, or that other relationships with people, land, and more-than-human life may be possible and indeed deeply rooted in human societies. Even while speaking regretfully about the violent history of colonization and genocide of native peoples in the US, Western education systems fail to disrupt the underlying ideologies that allow the continuation of the same historical forces (Calderon, 2014). In doing so, these historical forces - greed, appropriation, capitalism and private property, - are rendered as inevitable (Seawright, 2014).

These failures to disrupt underlying Lockean ideas of property ownership and right to land use, Western epistemological placenessless, and *Terra nullius* also serves to displace the process of colonization onto the past, refusing to confront the ongoing processes of colonization

that continues to be enacted (Seawright, 2014). As an outgrowth of this, systemic issues such as global capitalism are largely ignored in favor of “simple, individual ‘fixes’ that promote saving the environment through individual actions” (Bellino & Adams, 2017, 271). Meaningful engagement with solving environmental problems will require meaningfully addressing these issues and complex ecological and social problems (Bellino & Adams 273 -4)

Furthermore, in failing to disrupt the dominant power structures western education systems, and certainly white environmentalism as a product of this, ignores the “psychic or soul-wounding inherited by the colonial mindset” which “white people need to acknowledge” in order for healing to occur (Greenwood, 2009). When there is an acknowledgement of trauma within colonialism and other exploitative systems, that trauma is displaced onto exploited people and landscapes as a necessary casualty. To surrender to human nature, in this frame, is to inflict trauma, invisibilizing the way that one-sided an exploitative relationships and systems are harmful to those in positions of power as well. This also forecloses any pathway to healing and mutually beneficial relationships, as they are deemed unnatural and unable to persist in the long term. Indigenous scholars Redbear and Marker, as cited by Greenwood, conceptualize this succinctly: “we all have healing work to do around the soul wound of colonialism” (ibid).

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Dismantling the Ecological Indian Trope

As we have established, environmental ethics that center the relationships between people and land are rooted much farther back than dominant environmentalism places it. It is important to both acknowledge the history of an ethic of care and a relational land ethic as predating settler colonialism, and to situate this embodied indigenous knowledge as continually present (Smithers, 2015). While this relational ethic is not prioritized in dominant understandings, it is far from forgotten and has been clearly and continuously enacted within existing indigenous communities and other sites evolving from an indigenous epistemology (Cajete, 2005, p. 71). Some common themes within indigenous epistemologies write large that Cajate postulates are: a view of nature as sacred, interconnection, “reciprocity between humans and all other things,” and the cyclical nature of learning and being, to name a few tenants (Cajete, 2005, p.70). While their are these core similarities between different Indigenous environmental ethics across the world, as defined by Cajete, there are also dynamic and heterogeneous understandings and relationships to place that cannot be generalized and must be understood within the context of place.

Dominant environmentalism, when it does consider indigenous environmental ethics, tends to situate indigeneity as of the past. This is a product of understanding that is exported from Europe at the time of the colonization of the Americas, wherein European society and people are seen as more advanced and refined society (Smithers, 2015). All indigenous peoples across the Americas were framed as interacting the same way with the land, and as having the same belief systems and ways of life (ibid). From this understanding of the ‘noble savage’ we can see the springing up of the related trope of ecological indian that is prevalent in the US education system and dominant environmental movement today.

Focusing on American Indian bodies of knowledge as a place of specificity provides a window in what to understand what a relational ethic between people and land looks like. Cajete is careful to differentiate between the understanding “that American Indians were America’s first practical ecologists” which he terms as “a gross simplification,” and the more embedded sense of place within an ecological community that is the foundations of reality and sense of self (Cajete, 2005, 74). An evolution of this narrative is the “noble savage” trope, wherein indigenous americans served as a foil for the increasingly industrialized, and therefore spiritually bankrupt American society. Brayboy & McCarty further extend this idea, asserting that “Indigenous knowledge is far more than the binary opposite to western knowledge...Indigenous knowledge fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship” (Brayboy & McCarty, 2011, p. 189)

Instead of getting to the root of what a spiritually and emotionally bankrupt society means and where that denigration is coming from, an ahistorical and flat understanding of American Indian history was posited as an example of a simpler time. Gail Small (Cheyenne), as cited by Smithers, is clear in her criticism of this desire to use Indigenous American culture as a spiritual touchstone. She states that “Some white people look to us for help in their struggle with loss of identity, spirituality, and a sense of security... They need to find it within themselves and their own cultures. When they try to appropriate tribal cultures, they have a negative impact on our culture and alienate themselves even more from their own ability to be centered.” (Smithers 2015).

Even when acknowledging the importance of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is not in it of itself a neutral act. The mere idea that TEK exists as a separate form of knowledge, and is homogenized under one acronym, can be complicated further (Smithers, 2015). Indeed,

TEK “ is itself a construct of Western intellectual discourses” in that it reifies the split between environment/ecology and human societies. It should also be noted and understood that just as there are unifying principles of indigenous relationships to land, there are also diverging and dynamic forms of knowledge within a multitude of indigenous communities that can all be considered TEK. (ibid)

Tropes such as the “ecological indian” and “noble savage” simultaneously erase indigenous beliefs as they are currently constructed while also reifying colonization of indigenous ideas by removing them from their context and commodifying them for use in a particular, shallow narrative of indigenous relationship to land. This brings up the question: what is the purpose of understanding and deriving value from an indigenous, feminist ethic of care in environmental work? Given the (white, colonialist) context of the dominant environmental movement, is it possible to practice an ethic of care without co-opting and therefore colonizing indigenous feminist knowledge?

In the context of this paper, I attempt not to take, reassert control, and colonize knowledge, nor to attempt to return to a pre-colonial time in the pursuit of environmental stability, but to construct an as yet unimaginable decolonial future (Tuck and Yang 2012). As a white environmentalist within a context of public education and environmental work, I know that without sitting with our own complicity in systems of colonization and exploitation and engaging in meaningful action to disrupt these forces this will not be possible. Indeed, without careful and thoughtful connections to place and specific ways of knowing indigenous environmental ethics can easily become “territorialized – that is, understood within the context of settler ideology” (Calderon, 2014).

However, centering indigenous epistemologies and practices of care, in their various forms, provides vantage point to see just how deeply modern capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism have disrupted relationships with the land on multiple fronts. In order to reinvest in these relationships, indigenous environmental ethics can be seen as a pathway forward because these ethics require us to disrupt the systems of mutual exploitation. This also requires an investment in indigenous-led movements and organizations who are doing the work to address environmental harms.

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Disrupting Gendered and Racialized Care Responsibilities

Feminist care ethics and the ecofeminist movement, especially when analyzed along an axis of race, class, and sexuality, provide a path forward that sees the root of environmental harm as tied to systems of exploitation. Having ethics that prioritize care as a practice are, according to Whyte and Cuomo, specifically rooted in feminist movements (Whyte and Cuomo 2016, p. 5). Specifically, ecofeminism stemming from earlier hegemonic environmentalism begins to do the work of drawing connections between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the earth.

Eco-feminist critiques, as defined by Russell and Bell, make “explicit the links between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature in patriarchal culture” (Russell & Bell, 1996, p. 172). In doing so, ecofeminist critiques, also related to those of deep ecology, tend to draw attention to anthropocentrism and androcentrism as the root causes of environmental harms. In doing so, these ecofeminist critiques “suggest that it is primarily men, not women, who have contributed to environmental degradation” and that the overvaluing of human life, specifically male-human life, is the root of degradation (Russell & Bell, 1996, p. 173). Western thought at work here is the coding of both nature and indigenous people as feminine (Smithers, 2015). Qualities, therefore, such as taking care of the land and each other, nurturing actions, and place within an ecological system are therefore denigrated and seen as less valuable. Contrastingly, values and actions such as placing dominant human societies as separate from nature, and the conquering and exploitation of land and people are coded as masculine and therefore as more valuable (ibid).

To take this further, because caring actions such as childcare, cooking, and other nurturing activities are assigned to women in patriarchal gender roles, these antidotes to the exploitation of the environment are also a tool of continued oppression. This extends into the mainstream environmental movement, where “the importance of caring for other human beings as a way of caring for nature” is severely underestimated and limited (Whyte and Cuomo 2016, 5). Furthermore the social roles of caretaking we understand today are heavily influenced by settler colonialism in a way that does not reflect the nuanced and dynamic roles of women across indigenous communities, nor the value of caretaking in non-indigenous communities.

Indeed, caretaking as a revolutionary, anti-oppressive force requires “mutually beneficial caring relationships that do not exploit caregivers, that enable and encourage responsible and

healthy caring and caregiving, that highly value the input and autonomy of the cared-for, and that are promising as correctives to moral, political, and philosophical systems that neglect the significance of context, caring, and dependence in moral life” (Whyte & Cuomo, 2016, p. 19). In order to disrupt this colonial caretaking framework, which furthers exploitation, Kim TallBear, is clear that “caretaking...[is not] the sole domain of cisgendered, biologically-reproductive women” (TallBear, 2016).

The connections between exploitation of woman, the environment, and more-than-human life are important and deeply complex. However, those critical of ecofeminism also note that in general there is a lack of analysis in mainstream ecofeminism of the ways in which white people in industrialized nations are also the primary contributors of environmental harms. Indigenous feminism and other women of color feminisms in many ways serves as an extension of drawing these connections in more nuanced ways. Care in this understanding, can be both a tool of further oppression, such as through racialized “mammy” figure, and simultaneously, a radical act that interrupts the systems of exploitation that devalue it (Whyte & Cuomo, 2016, p. 18).

Indigenous feminism provides an even richer understanding of the connections between the social position of women and kinship relations. Historically, pre-colonial indigenous communities in what is now called the US “granted women respect and authority” and broadly practiced “gender egalitarianism” (Guerrero, 2003, p. 63). This, across diverging Native American groups, was part of a larger intergenerational community building that promotes at the core a sense of kinship, responsibility, and reciprocity with ones relations - including more-than-human life and landscapes (Guerrero, 2003, p. 65). Furthermore, more contemporary indigenous feminist movements such as the #NoDAPL movement have shown clear enactments of care ethics in their mobilizations, civil disobedience, and other actions (Whyte and Cuomo 2016, 9). This type of indigenous women-led social movements are seem to provide a glimmer of what a relational ethic of care can look like in practice (TallBear, 2016).

A broader gender analysis rooted current and evolving understandings of gender and sexuality might extend this to include the exploitation and erasure of other gender marginalized people, such as trans and gender non-conforming individuals. As a part of the colonial extermination project that has in large part obscured indigenous environmentalism and produced disconnection of human communities from ecological landscapes, other understanding of gender

that do not rely on binary and biological notions have similarly been invisibilized. However, Two-Spirit and other trans and gender-nonconforming indigenous folk play a central, specific, and radical role in community caretaking (TallBear, 2016). We can look at the way Two Spirit people have a particular care relationships within the community based on their roles in their respective communities (Driskill, 2010). In the current historical moment, “Two Spirit leadership is also key” with Two Spirit activists playing an integral role as “necessary for a community to be balanced” (Zahody 2014, 288 cited from TallBear, 2016).

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Indigenous Environmental Ethics: An Alternate and Embedded History

Looking at an alternative history of environmentalism, specifically indigenous environmentalism, places the start of environmentalism not as the creation of natural parks - a colonialist and therefore unsustainable endeavor in itself - but as a deliberately dismissed but continually present uncurrent fostered by specifically indigenous communities, later taken up by others (Cronon, 1996). Hidden by the dominant ideology of environmentalism is a deeply rooted ethic of care, where the earth in all of its complex socio-ecological systems, of which we are a part, requires acts of love and service that are returned in kind in order to maintain itself in the long term. This understanding also disrupts neoliberal environmental spaces that dominate the environmental movement, which claim to be working for the greater good but fail to address systemic issues and present themselves as both race-neutral and uncomplicated.

Speaking specifically to American Indian indigenous epistemologies, Cajete writes that nature is “taught about and understood in and on its own terms... the environmental foundation of tribal education, tribal people and their environment established and perpetuated a mutual and reciprocal relationship.” (Cajete, 2005, 74). Place-based education models, and the lived realities of all people, particularly indigenous people, are foundational to environmental ethics wherein “the landscape...is not just a blank backdrop for the journey. It is an active space, not a neutral, insignificant one” (Brayboy & McCarty 187). Embedded in the multitude of indigenous epistemologies and models of education, is the foundational understanding that humans “harbor an innate desire to be reciprocal with nature.” (Cajete, 1999). Winona LaDuke, an Anishinaabe environmental activist, defines this idea of reciprocity as the interconnection of “nonhuman and human ecosystems” wherein “all life-forms [are] animate” (Smithers, 2015). In this way people have a responsibility to care for each other, to care for the land and beings around them, and to

accept the care that the land bestows on us (Whyte and Cuomo 2016, 10-11).

Looking at relationships between people and land from this lens shows the faultlines and places of contradiction that the current historical moment encompasses. Looking at the Aamjiwnaang people living on their historical homelands in what is now Sarnia, Ontario brings these questions to the fore. Situated near the border of the US and Canada, proximally close to Detroit, MI means that the politics of the border shape the everyday life of the Aamjiwnaang people (Wiebe, 2016, p. 127). This brings up questions about relationships to place and environment and the colonial nationalist project of the US and Canada. What does it mean to be a citizen of these nations? What does it mean to have a sense of place, ownership, and responsibility to land that is so arbitrarily constructed as a part of one nation but not the other? The context of the Aamjiwnaang reservation itself as surrounded by polluting factories belonging to the chemical industry brings up direct questions of environmental caretaking and responsibility to place. These industries cause adverse health outcomes for the Aamjiwnaang people and changes the relationship that the Aamjiwnaang people are able to have with their landscape. In the use of the term *ecological citizenship* we begin to see the way that western capitalism and colonialism, intersected by other forces, prevents access to safety, health, land, and historical memory (Wiebe, 2016, p. 120). However, these forces cannot restrict or discontinue the relationship between people and land, and the reciprocal responsibilities that both have to each other to nurture and care.

As cited by Kim TallBear, Idle No More (INM), an indigenous led organization, is an clear example of these environmental ethics being enacted in an indigenous led context. Idle No More states that “Indigenous ways of knowing are rooted in Indigenous sovereignty to protect water, air, land, and all creation for future generations.” (TallBear, 2016). To INM care and protection of the earth is caring for future generations, and protecting the environment requires actions such as dances, direct actions, and other tactics (ibid). Other movements cited by Whyte and Cuomo such as the Chipko and Water Walk movements respectively also serve as model of these relational ethics on a global scale (Whyte and Cuomo 2016, 3). As such, they emphasize ecological interdependence and “the significance of caring for all kinds of others” (ibid).

Other examples of indigenous feminist environmental care ethics can be seen in the 2016 #NoDAPL movement, as well as earlier movements such as Winona LaDuke’s activism. Kim Tallbear in speaking about the #NoDAPL movement uses the phrase “caretaking kin” to

understand our actions and relationships to one another as a way to “add to our collective strength” (TallBear, 2016). Furthermore, this movement connects “the protection of Indigenous peoples and treaty rights to the protection of the earth and our other-than-human relatives” clearly drawing from an interconnected and reciprocal framework (TallBear, 2016).

Furthermore, the #NoDAPL movement continually asserted that the actions they undertook were acts of “*protection*, not protest” as part of a larger responsibility as indigenous women specifically as those with “sacred authority” to protect the water and to consider past, present, and future generations (Privott & Johnson, 2009, p. 75, 76). In this way we see that advocating for, and taking the responsibility of protecting the land is in it of itself a healing, caring act.

Drawing from the work of Idle No More, #NoDAPL, Winona LaDuke, and countless others we can understand caring is an action, relationships as dynamic and consistent processes, and reciprocal ethics as a complex web of interdependencies that encompass all life on this earth. Terms like care, relational, and reciprocal are cornerstones of having an ethic of care as an indigenous environmental ethic, however they often are seen as vague or undefined in terms of specific acts of care and relationship building. This is in part a linguistic fault: hegemonic narratives about care devalue, disconnect and make unspecific our lived experiences of care and caring, emptying the words of their meaning. Relatedly, this vague nature of care in understanding ethical frameworks is a product of the dominant society’s inability to imagine what a future that is not founded on exploitation and hierarchy could look like.

Acknowledging this point of conflict, and the inability to imagine and truly understand care work and reciprocal relationships in an embodied sense is a start, but it is far from an endpoint. Tuck and Yang in their seminal essay “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” provide us with an alternate understanding; inability to imagine (yet) is not hopeless. Instead, understanding the divergent complicity of white and non-indigenous people of color in maintaining colonization and asking questions about how to stop this complicity are a moves to settler innocence that is antithetical to the project of decolonization. This desire to be absolved from settler guilt and anxiety, and are in it of themselves a re-settling, not a true act of solidarity or decolonization (Tuck and Yang 2012, 7, 17). Instead, many of the questions that must be asked and the futures we must imagine s can only be “addressed at decolonization,” once land is returned and Native epistemologies and people are centered (Tuck and Yang 2012, 17, 26). In other words, that which is undefined, overlapping, un-imaginable before material solidarity and

rematriation of land to indigenous peoples is a start towards a decolonial future in a much more real and lasting way than defined goals and futures can ever be (Tuck and Yang 2012, 28). As Tuck and Yang so succinctly put it: “what is unsettling...should be unsettling” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3).

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Black Feminism: Enacting an Ethic of Care

Further work on my part needs to be done to understand the way that indigeneity is constructed in relation to blackness in the US specifically, and the relation to indigenous populations on the North, South, and Central American continents. I would first like to address the complicated nature of defining indigeneity and its relation to black people in the US specifically. Indigenous identity is extremely context specific and rooted in place. While some black feminist theorizing in the US is a product of Black African scholarship, which could be constructed as indigenous, much of the scholarship I am looking at is rooted in people descended from those enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of the Americas.

The rupture of those first enslaved people who were displaced from their indigenous lands and communities through the transatlantic slave trade is a topic that requires further care and examination than I am able to give here. However, it is clear that indigenous care ethics rooted in particular African communities were similarly uprooted and exported to the Americas during the violent process of enslavement and colonization. The subsequent black and black feminist reimagining of place and construction of caring relationships to each other as it was constrained and predicated on displacement and enslavement is complex in that it is rooted in understandings of place and indigeneity that are not simple.

LaPaperson provides some context to this understanding in defining “Ghetto Colonialism” at the “intersection between Indigenous displacement and black dislocation” (La Paperson 2014, p. 116). This is an important context which frames the power dynamics and multilayered systems of oppression at work in the US specifically. LaPaperson also critically analyzes the differential experiences of Native people, black folk, and white people to land. And rejects the narrative espoused by place-based pedagogy that “Native people used to live here. White people settled here; they fled. People of color replaced white people; they suffer” in favor of a more complex understanding that places the processes of colonization as ongoing and enacted differently on those of different races and other marginalized identities. (La Paperson,

2014, p. 121). Another important part of this article was in analyzing the way Place-based (above), Environmental Racism (pain discourse) and green curriculum (rescue) all fail to disrupt settler colonialism in their attempts towards ecological and social justice (La Paperson, 2014, p. 120)

I argue, along with many others, that black feminism clearly is rooted in acts of care and relationship building, as well as home-building and place-making, that are deeply connected to indigenous feminist care ethics. To use a contemporary example, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement “founded by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi” can be seen enacting both black feminist and indigenous feminist care ethics in an overlapping context (TallBear, 2016). TallBear writes specifically that she sees “women who lead the movement as sharing ground with women from #NoDAPL and Idle No More. I see them caretaking their peoples and others as they defend bodies marginalized in a brutal anti-Black, antitrans, anti-immigrant, and antiworker world.” (TallBear, 2016). This powerfully encompasses the solidarity found between the complex interplay of indigenous and Black voices in the US as a product of historical processes.

It is clear that black feminism of the 60s and 70s, emerging next to broader women of color feminisms including indigenous feminism, is deeply rooted in a history of enslavement, objectification, and exploitation as well as resistance, resilience, and care. In this way it is situated outside but also parallel to and interconnected with indigenous environmental ethics because of shared, yet distinct histories, and the conditions of white supremacy, colonialism/settler colonialism and resulting movements to address these social issues.

Indeed, Black feminist and other Women of Color feminisms clearly hold caring as “a way to address the structural oppression that pits the individual as above the community and the profit over the health of those communities (Whyte & Cuomo, 2016, p. 16). I see this in the work of Grace Lee Boggs, an Asian-American woman deeply embedded in the Black freedom movement in Detroit. Grace wrote in her book “The Next American Revolution” that “our responsibility, at the watershed in our history, is to face the past honestly and do the things necessary to heal ourselves and our planet” (Boggs, 2012, p. 164) She continues, illustrating that this healing requires not primarily of politicians but of “artists, ministers, gardeners, workers, families, women, and communities” (ibid). In this way we can clearly see an ethic of care underlying the historical movement of black freedom at this time. Furthermore, Grace saw the

important of the environmental justice movement and drew the connection to feminism movements as sources of activism that “model love, caring, healing, and patience that, along with an appreciation of diversity and of strengths and weaknesses (Boggs, 2012, p. 167, 173).

Other radical black movements such as the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program, as well as their Ten Point Plan, both of which are powerful actions that demonstrate an understanding of community needs and relationships complexly (Heynen, 2009). Dolores Huerta, a Chicana woman who was instrumental in the 1960s grape boycott addressing farmworker rights, clearly acted and relied upon community organizing models where care was central. During her time as an organizer Huerta mothered 11 children, and she did it through “the support of a community and we looked after each other.” (Schiff 2007, 315). Furthermore, the movements that Huerta organized intentionally set up inter-union daycare to support striking workers, specifically women (Godoy 2017). adrienne maree brown, a powerful scholar and activist in her own right, as well as a student of Grace Lee Boggs, asks questions in her book “Emergent Strategy” “how do we cultivate the muscle of radical imagination needed to dream together beyond fear?” (brown, 2017, p. 59). This type of questioning, imagining the future and redefining our relationships to each other, are clear examples of care ethics being enacted in ways that disrupt the status quo and therefore target exploitation of people and land broadly.

In their own words Tuck and Yang see solidarity as something found in “what is incommensurable rather than what is common across these efforts” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 28). Another way to put this is simply that there are no easy, neat, and discrete (settled) struggles and solutions, and our struggles against systems of oppression, from our respective positions in society and cultural understandings, are therefore interconnected and inseparable. In many ways, the Environmental Justice movement serves as a bridge, uniting the struggles of Black feminists, indigenous feminists, other Women of color feminists, and others.

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Maintaining the Status Quo is Not Sustainable or Just:

Care as a Healing, Anti-Oppressive Act

Many environmentalist spaces have demographics that are overwhelmingly white, and upper or middle class (Rainey & Johnson, 2009, p. 151). Often, these spaces position themselves as universal: everyone can care about environmental issues, regardless of race, class, gender, and other intersecting identities. And what are these spaces working against? Usually the goal of

these spaces is to foster behaviors that are deemed good for the environment, and to discourage behaviors that are seen as bad for the environment. Composting is good, Recycling is good, using less plastic is good, eating local and organic is good, biking to work is good. For white upper class environmentalists, making these changes to their lifestyle is not particularly difficult and allows them to claim a privileged status as morally righteous. Negative practices such as eating processed and packaged foods, throwing away too much trash, or commuting to work by car are discouraged and villainized. We know that the reduced environmental impact of recycling, composting, and low-emissions commutes does little to actually curb the carbon emissions being emitted to the atmosphere, so why is white environmentalism so concerned with these practices alone (Moser & Kleinhüchelkotten 2018)?

For low income people, who are disproportionately more likely statistically to be black, indigenous, and/or person of color (BIPOC), making sustainably-coded choices-like composting, eating more local and organic foods, and biking to work- is much more difficult, because these things all require access to resources, capital, and living conditions that allow for these actions to take place. Yet, low income groups tend to use far less energy and participate in environmentally beneficial practices like low-emissions travel and lower waste lifestyles at higher rates (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017). By placing the blame for environmental harms on the very communities that are most harmed white environmentalism is able to displace guilt and claim savior status for ‘sustainable’ practices that actually have little value in making deeper environmental sustainability practices a reality (Rainey & Johnson, 2009, p. 152). Notably mainstream environmentalism also largely ignores the largest contributors of greenhouse gases. Industries like the textile industry, which export their production to the exploited and formerly colonized global south (Indonesia, Bangladesh, etc.), are considered some of the largest polluters (Choudhury, 2014), as is large scale animal agriculture, and military technologies, yet these are not often acknowledged as such by mainstream environmental discourses (Moser & Kleinhüchelkotten 2018).

When faced with a rapidly changing climate dominant environmental movements often point to individual behaviors and lack of relationship to land as the culprits for environmental harm, not the mechanisms of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy working as designed. Along with straw and plastic bag bans, bike to work days, and compostable plastics, hegemonic environmentalism is increasingly becoming concerned with environmental education initiatives

supposedly aimed to connect urban youth in particular with the nature around them (Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2014). Some of the richest people in the world who are deeply invested in maintaining the exploitative systems that inherently devalue the ecosystem, also have hundreds of acres of private land, memories of going hiking or hunting with family, travel to far away places where they can experience ‘nature’ firsthand.

Based on this analysis, we see that mainstream environmentalism fails to place the blame for environmental issues on the capitalist, patriarchal, colonial underpinnings itself of Western society. With this knowledge we can understand the ways in which alternative histories, relationships to land and each other, and ethics that persist despite oppressive systems of power can be a source of hope and action as we confront the realities of our time.

Environmental Justice and Procedural Justice as a Path Forward

The Environmental Justice movement as a whole is centered around people of color, with specifically women of color playing an integral role (Rainey & Johnson, 2009, p. 146). Historically, this movement springs up out of the public health movement, drawing connections “between race and the location of hazardous waste sites in the US,” as well as other environmental harms (Rainey & Johnson, 2009, p. 153). Environmental Justice (EJ) frameworks recognize that those most impacted by environmental harms are disproportionately low-income people of color (ibid). In this way, Environmental Justice focuses on the root causes of environmental harm and provides an analysis that looks at multiple axis of oppression that allow this harm to persist. Furthermore, this movement provides solutions and mobilizations through grassroots efforts, taking “the concept of environmentalism beyond preservation of wilderness to include the impact of environmental hazards and of the degradation of the environment more broadly, on the daily lives and health of ordinary people” (Rainey & Johnson, 2009, p. 150).

Centering an EJ framework serves to complicate our relationships with land, acknowledging that the land we live on and the environmental harms therein, is deeply impacted by race and class and the position we occupy in society. Furthermore, Indigenous feminist understandings of place make clear that “all places were once Indigenous lands and continue to be,” and require an relationship with each other, the land, and the more-than-human world that is active, alive, engaged, and deeply caring (Calderon, 2014). Black feminist theorizing held next to and within these ethics provides an understanding of collective liberation and the knowledge that we are “more than victims of oppressive power structures, but also as being that hold power

already that we can exercise in thoughtful, strong, beautiful ways” (Boggs, 2012, p. 33).

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