

# NPOQ

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

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## The Face of Climate Change

*Indigenous Teachings  
for Our Future*

**The Pendulum  
of Climate:  
A Hopi Story**



**Cycles of Climate,  
Cycles of Life**

**Stories from the  
Annals of Coast Salish  
Permaculture**

**From the Earth to  
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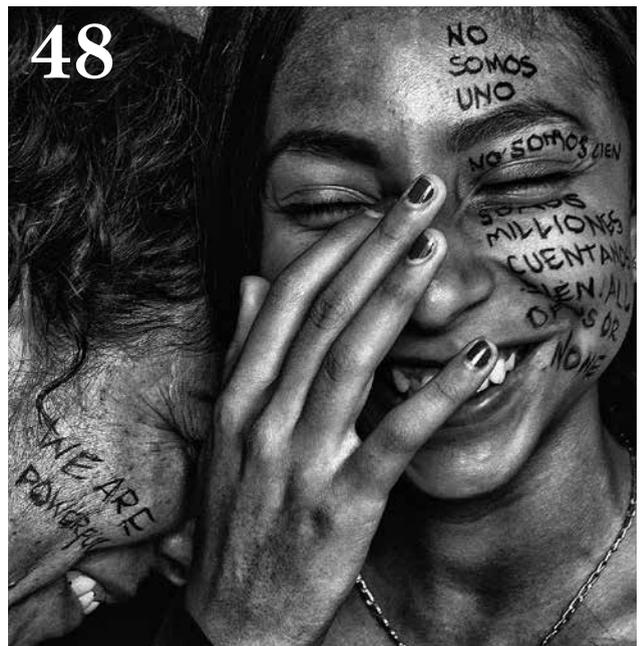
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# WELCOME



Dear Readers,

In this time, we are starting to get very concrete about what is needed to address climate crisis across the planet. It is clear that the world needs to respond both quickly and, more important, adequately—and, as the articles articulate within, that we must shift our planning and strategy from short-term crisis response to long-range, cyclical designs more in line with nature.

A long-standing creed is that Indigenous people are the global stewards of the planet and always have been. A-dae Romero-Briones, director of programs of First Nations Development Institute's Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative—and guest editor of this issue of *NPQ*—agrees, and in a conversation with *NPQ* noted that Indigenous people have been preparing for climate change specific to human disruption of the planet for generations:

What is the point in time where climate change started to happen? When you started damming rivers, when you started siphoning aquifers, you started clear-cutting, you started to remove the people. And part of that removal includes the emotional, cultural, and social attachments to those lands and the understanding of those lands. And that's the moment where you start to see dramatic climate disruptions, followed by the onset of industrial agriculture, which only exacerbated what was already happening. So what tends to be marked as the point in time when climate change started to happen—the Industrial Revolution—in my mind is a falsehood. You have to go back before that. But in order to go back before that, you need to talk to the people who have understanding of the time before that. And that's Indigenous people. . . .

These conversations have been happening for at least my full generation, which is at least forty years, *and* my parents' generation. They had these conversations, too. I think the moment of colonization was the moment we started having these conversations.

During my own research of the evolution of climate justice movements last year, it felt like there was a silent conversation happening among the different movements as each group positioned itself around what it deemed the principles to follow and the critical issues to address vis-à-vis climate justice. Some focus on policy and mitigation of harms, some are anchored in reparations, some center on landback and stewardship. For *NPQ*, as we prepared this edition on climate justice, this silent conversation seemed to be where we are in terms of what is happening in the field. I'm part of quite a few conversations around climate justice, and I don't see Native people in almost any of the spaces that I'm in. I see lots of money. And I see who and what that money is funding. And I see who and what it is not. And I think that disconnection is a big part of the story.

Romero-Briones described her view of the disconnection like this:

As I see it, one of the principles of white supremacy is *urgency*—“You have to move now, you only have *this* amount of time”—because it forces communities, it forces society, to make decisions really quickly and only engaging the smallest amount of the information we need to make these very critical decisions. To me, that’s a tenet of white supremacy—because what happens is that the entities most able to accept and move resources—capitalist institutions, usually run by white men—are able to receive those resources to address whatever climate event is happening. But when you look at Indigenous ways of thinking, it’s a community decision—we have to decide how we’re going to survive as a community. If one of us doesn’t survive, none of us survives.

There is no denying that the planet faces an existential crisis; but the roots of the crisis go back very far in time—and Indigenous people have been talking about it, planning for it, fighting against it, and organizing around it since the beginnings of colonial settlement around the world. Most non-Indigenous people don’t have this long-term perspective—nor the many-centuries-old knowledge of natural cycles, and what to do to manage these and modify human practices when needed to get back into balance with the natural world. This edition seeks to uplift this crucial piece of the conversation.

Cyndi Suarez  
President and Editor in Chief  
NPQ

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# Cycles

by *A-dae Romero-Briones*

Changing long-standing institutions and behaviors . . . means re-forming the story of the present and who we, as a society, are. We can start by listening to the stories of those who are typically excluded in our national narratives—the Indigenous people who continue to live, thrive, witness, and care for the lands, communities, and nonhuman relatives who remain despite it all.

In my community, cycles are fundamental to understanding our world. Everything happens in cycles. From the growth of people, animals, and community, to the weather—cycles help define our relationships with all that surrounds us. Even the accumulation of knowledge happens in cycles.

Because of this understanding, four basic tenets of life are: (1) always be mindful of the fact that we are part of many cycles happening all around us at any given time; (2) everything living will return to repeat the cycle from which it started; (3) the end is just as important as the beginning; and (4) the middle of the cycle is always difficult to recognize, unless one is paying close attention. So, when climate change is described as an ending or apocalyptic human event—as it so often is, particularly in news and articles—I have to pause and return to my most basic teachings, and articulate the dramatic environmental and social changes in my lifetime as parts of a process that has neither a beginning nor an end but rather comprises events and markers of a recognizable cycle. The question then is, What is the cycle we are meant to recognize?

Climate change is as much a political marker as it is an environmental and social crisis. News stories daily announce a warming planet experiencing ongoing droughts, floods, wildfires, and endangerment or outright extinction of critical species of animals and plants. In the midst of this, corporations continue to make record profits, food prices rise, and in so many ways the world continues to operate in a “business as usual” way, albeit at a higher and higher cost that is unbearable for many. For some communities, the cost-benefit analysis of climate change is inherently distorted to begin with, while other communities bear the burden of climate change disproportionately—and have done so since its inception.





We can reteach ourselves to see and understand how to change long-standing detrimental behaviors, habits, and institutions that have altered our human ability to respond to injustice, damaged our sense of responsibility to one another and our environments, and blinded us to the paths of coexistence with our planet and each other.

In a write-up of the International Panel on Climate Change's most recent report, historian Harriet Mercer declares, "Connecting climate change to [. . .] acts of colonisation involves recognising that historic injustices are not consigned to history: their legacies are alive in the present."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, suppression of fire management and controlled burns, which is most readily used as an example of colonial disruption of Indigenous practices that are much needed presently, is but one of many other examples of colonial models that have led to environmental harms and climate crisis—first, and most critically, the removal of entire communities from their lands, either for colonial expansion or forced labor. This creates a process of *devaluing*, for the communities with the closest relationship to land know, understand, cultivate, and protect the value of the land on which they live and depend.

The process of removing the people from the land means that the value, history, and relationships embedded in that human–land relationship are not only not communicated but completely disregarded. A new value can be assigned; however, the new value will be severed from the history, knowledge, and people—the very aspects of land value most desperately needed in order to understand climate cycles and human (and nonhuman) survival through these cycles. Also, once people have been forcibly removed from their lands a first time, subsequent removals become much easier; the behaviors, justifications, institutional permissions to remove entire groups of people from their land desensitizes society to loss in the name of “progress” and even “conservation.” The climate crisis, really, is waves of one loss after another.

Yet windows into change and opportunities to explore new models exist—especially when the communities can tell their own stories. It is in the experience of these

communities that we recognize the need for climate justice—not just in recognition of the communities that are often ignored or minimized but also because it is in the stories and lessons of climate injustice that we can recognize the cycles, particularly the most destructive ones, that are accepted as a “norm.” We can reteach ourselves to see and understand how to change long-standing detrimental behaviors, habits, and institutions that have altered our human ability to respond to injustice, damaged our sense of responsibility to one another and our environments, and blinded us to the paths of coexistence with our planet and each other. We begin by listening to and offering voice to people and communities who have stories that are outside of that norm, outside of the typical newsreels that continually reinforce the detrimental cycles.

Dr. Daniel Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation of Oklahoma, professor at Haskell Indian Nations University, and director of the Haskell Environmental Research Studies Center, says, “When we speak of climate change, we also need to speak of cultural change.”<sup>2</sup> Indigenous people's stories are the embodiment of that cultural change. Recently, a friend shared with me a photo of a cross-section of a redwood tree recently fallen from old age near the Sequoia National Forest. He pointed out that the tree's color began to change five hundred years or so ago, around the time of European contact in that specific area—going from a deep red in precontact times to white post-contact. The almost instant color difference marked a dramatic shift in the tree's environment, in our environment—and understanding what happened in that shift is critical information about the destructive cycles that began with European contact, and critical information about how to change.

But how do we “hear” the story? It is through the stories of the people who live and interact daily with that tree that we

gain access to the story of that tree. The Sequoia National Forest is now under the tutelage of the National Forest Service, but prior to that, Mono (Monache), Wukchumni, Tūbatulabal, Paiute, and Western Shoshone occupied and stewarded the land, most likely when the tree still held its deep red color. The people's removal from their homelands is a critical part of the story that is often ignored, minimized, or justified as a natural progression of agricultural civilization. But, is it? The change in color seems to tell a whole different story. The story of Indigenous peoples offers critical information to our present cycle formation, and we are all sorely disadvantaged when the Indigenous story is missing—as it has been for far too long in our American narrative. It's time to change that.

A common thread weaves through these stories: They are often not told or not heard. This is not the case because Indigenous people haven't spoken their stories but because the world has created a history in which most Indigenous stories are disregarded. While there are many reasons why such a dynamic has embedded itself in our American and other Western institutions, there are many more reasons why that dynamic needs to be undone. Indigenous stories are fundamental to the cycles of climate and environment, and to our human ability to adapt and prepare for the most trying parts of these cycles.

When we listen to Indigenous stories, we start to recognize the beginnings of damaging behaviors that have led us into

extractive processes that are rarely ever questioned: land accumulation at the expense of entire communities; replacement of slow-growing plant relatives, because there is no market for non-commodity crops; diversion of water from natural landscapes to only money-generating enterprises; deprivation of entire ecosystems of sustenance; devaluation of countless human and nonhuman communities for extraction of more valued resources; and replacement of Indigenous knowledge systems with Western ones, because that's a marker of "civilization." These behaviors, and the institutions that support their continued practice, have degraded our planet to a point of crisis.

Changing long-standing institutions and behaviors requires both individual and collective action. It means re-forming the story of the present and who we, as a society, are. We can start by listening to the stories of those who are typically excluded in our national narratives—the Indigenous people who continue to live, thrive, witness, and care for the lands, communities, and nonhuman relatives who remain despite it all.

This series only touches on the vast Indigenous knowledge of the environment and how climate change is part of the knowledge. It is my hope that readers will become curious enough to learn more—and, more important, will begin to recognize the patterns of cycles that we continue to contribute to and which desperately need to change. Indeed, each one of us can, instead, find ways to contribute to cycles that sustain us all.

## NOTES

1. Harriet Mercer, "Colonialism: why leading climate scientists have finally acknowledged its link with climate change," April 22, 2022, [theconversation.com/colonialism-why-leading-climate-scientists-have-finally-acknowledged-its-link-with-climate-change-181642](https://theconversation.com/colonialism-why-leading-climate-scientists-have-finally-acknowledged-its-link-with-climate-change-181642).
2. Articulated during an informal gathering at which the author was present.

**A-DAE ROMERO-BRIONES** (Cochiti/Kiowa) is the director of programs, Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative, at the First Nations Development Institute, and cofounder and former executive director of Cochiti Youth Experience, New Mexico. Formerly, Romero-Briones was the director of community development for Pūlama Lāna'i, Hawai'i.

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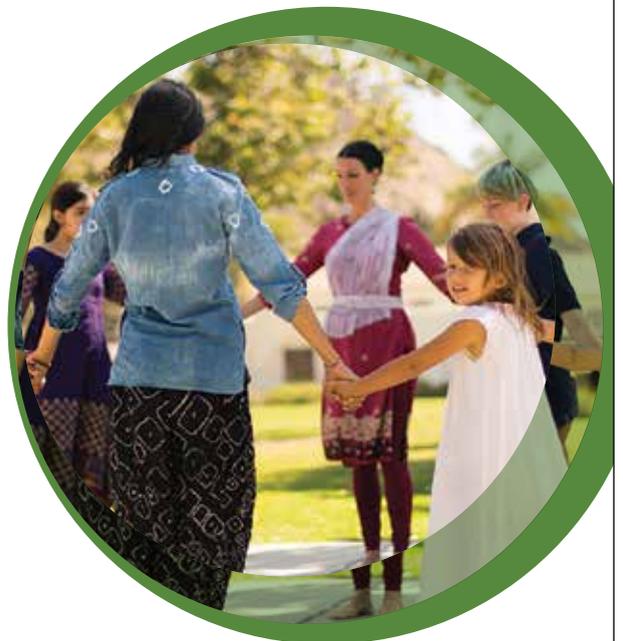
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# The Pendulum of Climate

## A Hopi Story

by *Monica Nuvamsa*

Hopis view the world and the human experience in cycles. In these cycles, we see change and recalibrate our understanding of change through the lens of natural laws that fluctuate like a pendulum between a state of balance and imbalance.

### Women's Rain Song

*There below the mesas, the gentle rain comes,  
turning the valley bright with lush green light.*

*There the female spirits of the cornstalks*

*wave their leaves, calling home*

*the unpredictable rain.<sup>1</sup>*

The geography of Hopi society remains isolated from the fast-paced movement of urban life, placing us in our own microcosm of change and evolution, both ecologically and socially. But change, like nature, remains slow in our private corner of the world. I am a Hopi female raised culturally as a traditional food and farming practitioner. I come from generations of traditional farmers, seed savers, and food foragers. Through this experience, I learned to recognize and understand the strength of our Hopi agricultural systems—first, from the practical application of collecting, preserving, growing, processing, and eating from the land; then, as I matured in life, the deeper meaning and application of our social, religious, and spiritual food knowledge were taught to me. These teachings have never been separate from our relationship to the land, its changes, and its recovery; my worldview and spiritual upbringing shaped the lens through which I view my ecosystem, climate, and the changes that impact the space I occupy on *tuwanasavi*—the center of our world.



**I learned to read the energy of the hustle and bustle of my community with the luminosity of the sun in the sky, and mark the time of year. These spaces of “knowing” are a part of me, just as are the air I breathe and the sustenance that comes from the land on which I live.**

## **HOPÍ AGRICULTURAL SYSTEMS AND SPIRITUAL FOOD KNOWLEDGE**

The Hopi people represent diverse groups of clans that migrated to the Black Mesa plateau in Northeastern Arizona, as part of a fulfillment of spiritual destiny and a covenant to maintain the land as the various clans settled the area. From these migrations, clans became a singular society with a shared worldview of Hopi religion across the village settlements. From that era on, each village carried its own history and jurisdiction of clans, including farming, hunting, and gathering territories.

Because of our long, sustained history in a singular location, the shared transgenerational memory of the Hopi farmer and seed saver brings a unique lens to both climate and societal change. Unlike Western culture, which sees things more clinically and from a one-dimensional trajectory of social change, Indigenous cultures look at the world multidimensionally, inclusive of the spiritual perspective.

For example, Hopis view the world and the human experience in cycles. In these cycles, we see change and recalibrate our understanding of change through the lens of natural laws that fluctuate like a pendulum between a state of balance and imbalance. These varying states often rely on the effect of our relationship to one another as human spirits, and on the living earth that hosts the plants, animals, and all of the elements that support life, such as soil, water, and air. So, when a farmer works hard to prepare and seed his field, and nothing grows despite the rain, the farmer must reflect on what is balanced and unbalanced in his life.<sup>2</sup>

Such reflection can be prompted when the plants do not grow to maturity because the field mice eat the seed, the corn dries before it pollinates, or the crows feast on the young corn before it can be harvested. These are lessons for the farmer that create a ripple effect on the nature of the farmer's relationship to the land, and they demonstrate how the farmer's life is reflected in the field, and how awareness of and

connection to the land create the right symbiotic relationship that will make the crop successful. Every year, there are new lessons to learn.

## **SPACES OF “KNOWING”**

My relationship to the land is not as a climate “expert” but as an Indigenous seed saver, food preparer, and active participant in the farming culture of Hopi. My part in this long tradition is from the perspective of a female, knowing only specific aspects of the process that relate to my stewardship and preservation of seed and the processing and preparing of our harvest for food and spiritual use.

Growing up in the High Desert region of Northeastern Arizona, I came to learn the land and its annual seasons like a clock. I learned to recognize the difference between the winter clouds and the summer clouds, and the simple nuances in the fragrances of plant life, and to know what time of year we are in because of what is ready to harvest. In the spring, women and children gather fresh greens, such as milkweed spinach, which is the first to present its seasonal bounty—and along with it, the special breads we make from blue cornmeal to complement its earthy flavors. As with many of our crops, there are multiple varieties of spinach plants that we harvest, and depending on the terrain, we learn in which soil each prefers to grow, so that we can find it.

I lived in a multigenerational home with my maternal grandparents, maternal uncle, mother, and brothers. What they taught me was a privilege of experiences I didn't come to recognize until I became an adult. I was raised around the annual cycle of Hopi agricultural and ceremonial life since childhood, learning my role daily in supporting these systems. My grandparents expected me to help with shelling corn in late spring for the start of the big corn planting season, with food foraging of plants during the summers, and with cleaning the corn and preparing it for storage in the fall, before ceremonial events marked the time for the earth to take its winter rest.

***Being raised in a farming family, I was often reminded that the seeds are my children. When we plant the seeds in Hopi soil, they grow strong and resilient to all things that try to harm their path to maturity.***

I learned to read the energy of the hustle and bustle of my community with the luminosity of the sun in the sky, and mark the time of year. These spaces of “knowing” are a part of me, just as are the air I breathe and the sustenance that comes from the land on which I live. Moments like this throughout the year inspire an anticipation of change while pointing me forward to the next task at hand around our family activities or the preparing of food to contribute to events in my village.

### **THE SEEDS ARE OUR CHILDREN**

Being raised in a farming family, I was often reminded that the seeds are my children. When we plant the seeds in Hopi soil, they grow strong and resilient to all things that try to harm their path to maturity. Hopi life philosophy is conveyed through such metaphors of raising corn in all its stages—the care as well as the risks that keep it from reaching maturity and fulfilling its purpose to the community. These philosophies bring out the practical nature in teaching simple and meaningful application vis-à-vis our relationship to the land and our resources.

Hopi farming technology, for example, includes a *sooya* (planting stick), a *wikoro* (watering gourd), *sivosi* (seeds), and the *taaqa* (male farmer). This technique of agriculture was honed over thousands of years with the simple tools that sustained generations of Hopi farmers. Today, with the introduction of new technology such as large farm machinery, it becomes more challenging to find balance with the impact to the land or our spiritual investment in the process. Using large machinery too much can create soil erosion, including loss of topsoil during the windy seasons. Traditional farmers who have accepted the use of new technology also choose to keep a balance by starting their fields and planting by hand, and finishing with a tractor. This serves to remind them that farming is a relationship with the seed and the soil.

As a food preparer, I was taught similarly. When preparing food, we do so with a good heart, so that this feeling will

enter the food and fill others with that goodness, and strengthen them. If we are sad or angry, the food we prepare will not taste as good nor give the sustenance we want. In this way, the intentions of our work as farmers and food preparers are important to the spiritual life of our families and communities.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE AND IMPACT ON THE HOPI WORLD**

The Hopi reservation has experienced an extended thirty-year drought—meaning that our normal rainfall of seven inches a year has decreased to extreme dry conditions of four inches or less rainfall per year.<sup>3</sup> Over the last one hundred years, we had two significant droughts,<sup>4</sup> but neither one extended as long as those of the past three decades.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1990s, farmers have been able to bring home a harvest, but with a loss of nearly half of the crop to animals and/or extreme winds. Due to the dryness and lack of food and water, large animals such as elk and deer have roamed to lower elevations, where the fields are, to eat—competing with the usual animals we must keep away from our crops: gophers, quails, coyotes, and crows. The windy season that our farmers are accustomed to is usually in April, when the season changes from winter to spring. We call it the month of “Wind Row” planting, when farmers create barriers using dry plants to protect the early corn. Now, the windy season extends well into June.

In recent years, Hopi farmers have also experienced dry winters and late rainfalls, which no longer seem to align with our planting cycles. Farmers must risk planting early and experiencing a late frost or late monsoon season, either of which would be detrimental to their hard work and harvest. Most Hopi farmers rely solely on the winter soil moisture and

summer monsoon season to water their crops. Today, some farmers have chosen to shift their traditional views on irrigation and have begun to haul water to their fields to sustain their crop. As a result, the last few decades have brought new challenges to our routines of harvest, as traditional food preparers are choosing to buy their corn and flour from neighboring tribes who have irrigated fields near rivers and areas less impacted by the drought.

Farming families work hard to prepare corn for storage for later use, and we are taught to keep at least four years of corn harvests in storage in case of drought or to prepare for major life events such as marriages, births, and ceremony. My household has not had a harvest in nearly three years. I follow the teachings I've learned and set aside seed for the next planting cycle, but in the past two years I've reduced my portion of seed each year, because the risk of loss in my community heirloom seed stock is too great for me. I have enough seed for one more planting season. This year, I will

plan to buy my corn from neighboring tribes to meet what is needed to prepare food for the upcoming events. It is in these times that the teachings come forth and I begin to fully understand why we do this: why we save, why we work hard to have good storage for future years, and why we anticipate the years that may not produce a good harvest.

The Hopi worldview understands the connection to nature and the ebb and flow of the pendulum of change. I accept that Hopi teachings take the long view of things, and wait to observe when the pendulum of climate has shifted and we can look forward to an abundant season once again. As Hopi farmers and seed savers, we can no longer migrate, as we believe we have found our destined homelands. Instead, we must strengthen our roots by taking stock of our seeds, and adapt to the changes that we experience—always with faith that the pendulum will rebalance, and our constant self-reflection of our livelihoods will bring good rain to our fields and another year of bountiful harvest.

## NOTES

1. Interpretation of a Hopi Women's Rain Song.
2. Traditionally, Hopi farmers are male. However, if a family raises more daughters than sons, the daughters are involved to take on the responsibility, such as has occurred in my family.
3. The experience of rainfall can vary based on the geographic regions on our Hopi reservation, as the area spans nearly 100 square miles. I farm in a region with some of the lowest rainfall across the reservation. This reference is based on oral traditional knowledge from older generations of farmers who recalled the last long drought as being around the 1930s and extending almost twenty years. Smaller droughts have been experienced since, and the current one has impacted food storage. As the experience of climate and its effects is dependent on geographic location, and most studies are targeted to specific regions on the reservation, descriptions may not always reflect the totality of the various experiences of the Hopi farmer.
4. I recollect oral traditional knowledge in gauging the last drought in the 1930s. The second drought that specific regions of farmers began experiencing was in the late 1980s.
5. Per my recollection, there may have been a couple of wet years between 1990 and 2010 that closed the term of the official drought; however, the dry season remained consistent, and my family was unable to grow crop at the same capacity. These are noted as an extension of a drought from the local farmer's perspective.

**MONICA NUVAMSA**, Hopi and member of the Water Cloud Clan from the Village of Songoopavi, is the executive director of the Hopi Foundation. Her experience includes local community grant making, nonprofit and community capacity building, community leadership development, and community organizing. Nuvamsa has served on several nonprofit boards, including Native Americans in Philanthropy, Native American Agriculture Fund, First Nations Development Institute, and the Arizona Alliance for Nonprofits. Nuvamsa has a BA in psychology and American Indian studies and a certificate in graduate research studies from the Arizona State University Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation.

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## About the Artist: Chip Thomas



Chip Thomas, aka “jetsonorama,” is a photographer, public artist, activist, and physician who has been working between Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon in the Navajo Nation since 1987. There, he coordinates the Painted Desert Project—a community-building project that manifests as a constellation of murals across the Navajo Nation, painted by artists from all over the reservation and the world. These murals aim to reflect love and appreciation of the rich history shared by the Navajo people back to Navajo people. As a member of the Justseeds artists cooperative, Thomas appreciates the opportunity to be part of a community of like-minded, socially engaged artists. You can find his large-scale photographs pasted on the roadside, on the sides of houses in the northern Arizona desert, on the graphics of the Peoples Climate March, and on Justseeds

and 350.org carbon emissions campaign material. Thomas was a 2018 recipient of a Kindle Project gift, and in 2020 he was one of a handful of artists chosen by the United Nations to recognize the 75th anniversary of its founding.

Thomas writes,

The question I’m asked most frequently is how a Black doctor in his fifties working on a Navajo reservation started doing street art on said reservation. In retrospect, it was only natural for this evolution to occur. . . . I’d always been drawn to photography, and built a darkroom shortly after my arrival at the Navajo Nation. . . . By going out and spending time with people in their homes and family camps, I have come to know them as friends. Interestingly, these home visits enhance my doctor/patient relationship by helping me be a more empathetic healthcare practitioner. I’ve always been drawn to street art, graffiti, and old school hip-hop. I was attracted to the energy of the culture in the ’80s, and though I was miles away from the epicenter, I thought of myself as a charter member of the Zulu Nation. I would travel to New York City to see graffiti on trains, on buildings, and in galleries. I did some tagging in the ’80s before coming to the Navajo Nation, and participated in a major billboard “correction” on the reservation shortly after my arrival. . . . In 2009, I took a three-month sabbatical in Brazil, which coincided with a difficult period in my life. Though I wasn’t looking for an epiphany, I was fortunate to stumble upon a passionate group of artists working on the street, who befriended me. It was during this time that I appreciated how photography could be a street art form. Inspired by Diego Rivera and Keith Haring, I’d become disinterested in showing my photographs in galleries isolated from the people I was photographing, and wanted to pursue a more immediate relationship with my community—reflecting back to them some of the beauty they’ve shared with me. . . . I’d like to think that my vision is a part of the storytelling, first-person, humanist tradition of the people I look up to mixed with a healthy dose of Rivera and Haring.

Regardless, I give thanks that the journey continues.

In beauty it is finished.

# Fire and the Coast Salish Three Sisters

*by Samuel Barr*

Coast Salish tribes have lived on the San Juan Islands for thousands of years, learning hard lessons of how to live with the land. During that time there has been trial and error, when foods disappeared...

Sustainable practices needed to be developed—practices that would be simple to manage, would not endanger people, and would support producing food naturally. The answer to those needs was fire.

*Oftentimes, when people think about the Pacific Northwest and the Salish Sea, they think of lush evergreen rainforests. They think of verdant ferns and dew-covered mosses, grand western red cedar trees, and broad leaf maples. However, there is an archipelago within the Salish Sea, a group of islands in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains, that receives just half of the precipitation of Seattle. Today, these islands are known as the San Juan and Gulf Islands. They are very dry: native cacti grow on the rocky bluffs, and many of the beaches have windy sand dunes. The ecosystems are so diverse that you can walk from a snow-covered mountain to a cactus-covered bluff in a single afternoon. It is here that my ancestors discovered how they could play a pivotal role in maintaining these bountiful, naturally productive gardens with one simple tool: fire.*





“XÍCIL KÁYØ” (“ANGRY GRANDMOTHER”), CARVED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAMUEL BARR/GUEMESISLANDART.ORG/HOMEPAGE/SAM-BARR

**A**n ancient permaculture concept has existed in Middle and North America for thousands of years that uses companion planting of three crops that form a symbiotic relationship. Many people know these as the “Three Sisters”: maize, climbing beans, and squash. The cornstalks provide a trellis for the beans, the beans strengthen the cornstalks and fix nitrogen into the soil, and the squash ward off weeds and pests. In the Americas, this system may have been in practice for 3,500 years or more.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, a lesser-known “companion planting” permaculture practice in the Pacific Northwest Salish Sea in Native America—a Coast Salish version of the Three Sisters that expands across ecological zones from terrestrial prairies to the nearshore aquatic. Three of the main food staples, *Garry oak*, *camas*, and *salmon*, were all managed with fire ignited by traditional Coast Salish people—that is, until incoming settlers upended the traditional management practices.

Fires have been suppressed in the Pacific Northwest since settler “establishment” of American territory.<sup>2</sup> Oregon Territory was established in 1848, which included the area we now know as Washington State. The Treaty of Point Elliot was signed in 1855 and ratified in 1859, with tribes being relocated to minuscule reservations. In the 1860s, there was a smallpox epidemic that decimated Coast Salish communities. And by the 1870s, the remaining longhouses in traditional locations were being destroyed by American settlers.<sup>3</sup>

Nowadays, houses sprawl across the landscape—both along the waterfront and in the forested uplands. In traditional times, there were no houses in the forests or hills of the

islands that would be at risk from a wildfire—people lived along the beaches. Now, there are million-dollar retirement mansions in the middle of forests of what may as well be matchsticks. There is also industry incentive to “protect” forests from fire in order to preserve the harvestable timber. There is very little fire risk management other than the suppression of all wildfires—which actually increases the risk from wildfire due to buildup of fallen branches and other natural debris on the forest floor. And, if anyone wants to perform a controlled burn for cultural or ecological reasons, an enormous pile of permits is required. Further complicating the picture, land on these relatively small islands tends to be owned and managed by a mix of federal, state, county, and private or nonprofit entities. It is politically challenging to manage lands on an ecosystem-wide level when there can be a dozen stakeholders involved. All of these complications have led to a severe loss in habitat and endangerment of the Coast Salish Three Sisters.

### **GARRY OAK, CAMAS, AND SALMON**

The *Garry oak* produces acorns that are easily stored for long periods of time and are edible after processing. They produce a coarse flour that can be added to soups or mixed into pemmican along with cured meats and dried berries. The oak flour can also be blended with cattail root flour, which contains gluten, and cooked into a bannock. The acorns have a nutrient profile that includes fat, protein, and carbohydrate.

Historically, fire supported the life cycle of the *Garry oak*. Not only did it eliminate the taller conifers that could overshadow

**Historically, fire supported the life cycle of the *Garry oak*. Not only did it eliminate the taller conifers that could overshadow it but it also appeared to encourage the acorns to sprout. And even if the top of the tree was killed by the fire, its roots could send up new sprouts.**

it but it also appeared to encourage the acorns to sprout. And even if the top of the tree was killed by the fire, its roots could send up new sprouts.<sup>4</sup> The fires would burn up the coniferous trees, but Garry oak trees are fire-adapted to withstand the heat, so they remained.<sup>5</sup> This created a sort of oak savanna similar to those in the Midwest.

The wood of this oak tree is valuable, too: the traditional name, *cheng'ilhch* (chung-eel-ch), translates to D-adze tree, referring to the traditional carving tool's handle made from it, and the wood is also used for making tools that are used to dig the *camas* that grows in the same ecosystem—one of the many important native food and medicine plants that grow in the prairies on these rain shadow islands. Camas is a purple flowering bulb whose ranges extend from British Columbia to California to Montana and Wyoming. Many tribes have used it as a food source because it is delicious.

Although camas isn't in common usage nowadays, it exemplifies the principles of the slow food movement. The seeds take four to five years to become a mature bulb, and the bulbs take twenty-four to thirty-six hours to cook in a traditional earthen steam oven. Early explorers in the Pacific Northwest, when first encountering the flowering purple fields of camas, mistook them for a purple lake because the flowers were so abundant. The cooked and processed camas was preserved for winter storage and for trade. It was also ground into a flour and used to sweeten soups and other foods.<sup>6</sup>

Controlled burns across the landscape maintained open prairie habitat for the camas flowers to thrive. Now, the forest edge is encroaching on the open spaces where Douglas fir trees quickly overshadow the relatively short Garry oak trees. The invasive pasture grasses, introduced as fodder for sheep and cows, are now forming thick sod with tall grasses that choke out the native camas flowers. There has been a 91 percent loss of Pacific Northwest prairies, with only 3 percent that are productive with native species.<sup>7</sup>

Today, many of the Coast Salish tribes are rekindling their relationship with these plants. Talking to tribal elders about camas fields is like hearing about a mythical plant from storied times that nobody has tasted in over a century. Small groups within a few tribal communities, however, are bringing these delicious plants back. Because camas bulbs take such a long time to cook and can be tedious to harvest (especially in an untended prairie), it is a labor of love. Some people use crock pots to slow-cook the camas, but the traditional



cooking method is to heat rocks with fire in a 3' x 3' x 3' hole in the ground, then bury the clean camas bulbs in a bundle of plants and steam them in the earth for twenty-four to thirty-six hours. This method is far superior to Crock-Pot cooking, because it imparts an earthy/smoky flavor to the caramelized starches of the bulb.

One example of a group that is practicing these traditional pit-bakes is the Coast Salish Youth Stewardship Corps, an intertribal group comprising youth from up to seven or more tribes with ancestral ties to the San Juan Islands, many of whom have not seen camas practices in their families for three generations or longer.<sup>8</sup> This group is aiming to put traditional ecological knowledge into practice toward habitat enhancement and environmental stewardship, and has performed four annual camas bakes to date to feed tribal youth and elders.

While the relationship with camas and Garry oak did fall out of practice, most tribes never stopped fishing—and *salmon*, one of the most important food sources in the entire delicatessen of Coast Salish culture, is highly revered as being a sacred gift to the people. There are countless methods to fish for, cook, and prepare salmon. It is mind-boggling how many different technologies were developed for one fish with the simple materials of wood, bone, and stone.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes regarded as one of the healthiest meats, this fish has sustained millennia of Coast Salish people, who recognized its importance. It is honored in legends that are thousands of years old, many of which have management techniques encoded within them.

Some of these stories mention that a certain medicinal plant, when burned on the shore, would send a smell into the water and call the salmon back home. It helped the fish to

**Tribal elders speak of how the fires also had a positive impact on the nearshore aquatic habitat, from its use as an aid to carving out large dugout cedar canoes to promoting salmon runs through the islands.**

navigate from the open ocean to return into the Salish Sea. This is a very old legend that science has recently backed up; we are aware that fish use a combination of an internal geomagnetism to get themselves close to their home stream and then scent-memory to ascertain the exact location of their birthplace.<sup>10</sup> They miraculously find their home stream after traveling thousands of miles. Fires can also create complexity in river systems and nearshore marshes that is beneficial for fish, such as when trees fall into the water and create diverse habitats.<sup>11</sup>

Tribal elders speak of how the fires also had a positive impact on the nearshore aquatic habitat, from its use as an aid to carving out large dugout cedar canoes to promoting salmon runs through the islands by sending nutrients from the ash to eelgrass beds and attracting the fish by its scent. Smoke cover also cooled the water temperature in the heat of the summer, making the water more habitable for fish.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these lessons are learned from the “Salmon Boy” story, a legend shared by many Coast Salish people. It is about a young boy playing by a river who got swallowed whole by a large salmon. This fish took the boy down into the deep salt water, where there was a salmon village, complete with salmon longhouses with fires. The boy lived with the salmon long enough to learn their culture and what they needed to continue to flourish, which became the people’s creed of responsibility of stewardship after the boy returned home and told the people of all he had learned.

Today, tribes still recognize and celebrate this story annually to honor the salmon and our commitment to stewarding the

waters, often working to reverse the damage from the last one hundred and fifty years of settler sprawl and overtaking of land management, when tribes were removed from most of their traditional territory and placed on small reservations.

Another ancient story, the legend of Qwu7qwe7elwut (kwoh-kwol-uh-woot), describes the marriage between the land, the sea, and the Coast Salish people from the Samish Tribe. It tells of a young maiden who caught the eye of the god of the sea. He wanted her hand in marriage, but the maiden’s father refused to let his daughter marry him and live underwater. So, the god of the sea took away all the water and all the seafood, and the people suffered. Eventually, the father gave in and allowed them to marry, but only so long as it was promised that she would return home to visit each year. Eventually, Qwu7qwe7elwut became adapted to the sea and uncomfortable on land, so she doesn’t visit anymore. But we do see her kelp-forest hair in the waters of Deception Pass.

The sea has gifted the Samish people with bountiful foods from the water ever since. This is an abbreviated version of the legend, but it gives you an idea of how deep the connection among people, land, and water is for the traditional Coast Salish people. They viewed themselves as literally married to the sea, with their most beautiful maiden sacrificing herself to the sea in order to provide for the future generations. We see how there was an understanding that the management of the land and the management of the sea have an impact on each other, and that there is a connection among all the resources with which we live.

The importance of these three food staples cannot be overstated. All three could be preserved for winter use, when traveling by canoe was not possible and it was crucial to have enough food stores to make it through the dormant season. They were critical for trade, which I’ve heard my Coast Salish elders refer to as “Indian Insurance”—although it’s not so much trade as it is reciprocal gifting (when I have more than I need, I gift surplus to you; when you have more than you need, you gift surplus to me). One person’s good harvest means mutually ensured survival for all their relations. And all was made possible by the judicious use of fire.

## **WEEDING OUR GARDEN**

There is a persistent romantic myth that Indigenous Americans lived off the land without having to do any management. It is reductive to imply that traditional peoples simply picked



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berries off bushes and starved our way through existence, without any management or enhancement of the environment to which we are so deeply connected. Coast Salish tribes have lived on the San Juan Islands for thousands of years, learning hard lessons of how to live *with* the land. During that time there has been trial and error, when foods disappeared, such as in the legend of Qwu7qwe7elwut. Sustainable practices needed to be developed—practices that would be simple to manage, would not endanger people, and would support producing food naturally. The answer to those needs was fire—a versatile tool that could clear the forests and make way for prairies. If the tool ever “got loose” and spread beyond containment, it only further enhanced the environment. (Compare that to an oil spill.)

In fact, the traditional Coast Salish people were inter-ecosystem gardeners, and fire was their most useful tool for “weeding” their garden. A study done on Waldron Island in the San Juan Archipelago suggests that between 1700 and 1879, there were fires every 7.4 years, and that from 1880 to the present, fires have been occurring 103.8 years apart.<sup>13</sup> Imagine the effects of taking the gardener out of the garden for over one hundred and fifty years, and only weeding a tiny portion every one hundred and three years. The accumulating piles of debris are creating a tinderbox. The plants that were once treasured as sacred foods and medicine are being both overharvested and neglected. The salmon fish and the orca whale, once regarded as sacred relatives, are now endangered species. And the Coast Salish tribes themselves have been mostly removed from the landscape. The tribal elders who hold the traditional ecological knowledge are passing away—human libraries that we are losing year by year. And the majority of American society won’t even accept the oral histories as fact until there is an academic institution that verifies them.

Fire has other peripheral benefits, such as making the grounds easier to walk through, clearing out the understory of forests for easier game animal tracking, and promoting huckleberry growth. Another major benefit is the prevention of catastrophic fires through the reduction of ladder fuels—low-lying vegetation and fallen branches beneath and around trees that, when not properly maintained or even removed from high-risk wildfire areas, carry fire to the trees and in that way ignite large regions. Traditional Coast Salish practice was to frequently burn the understory of the forest, using a low-intensity fire that would only burn up the small bushes

and sticks. Modern science now supports the traditional ecological knowledge that tribal elders have been passing down via oral history. There is evidence in paleo-pollen analyses that human-induced cultural fire regimes preserved these Garry oak/camas prairies for 3,800 years.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of frequent fires, these bushes and sticks accumulate into large piles that burn with higher intensity and spread the fire to the standing trees and canopy. So, even though fire is a rare occurrence, it becomes catastrophic when it does ignite. Lack of such traditional maintenance is one of the reasons why contemporary North America is struggling with wildfires. With rising average temperatures in the face of climate change, these lessons are going to be ever more important in the coming years.



*The San Juan Islands are sometime referred to by visitors as the “seaside emerald jewels of Washington State.” They are touted as being a place of immense natural beauty. The word “natural,” however, takes the traditional people who stewarded its beauty out of the equation. The truth is, it is a beauty that has been balanced with the gentle care of tribal people for thousands of years. Truly, all of America is Indian Country. Nearly every beautiful tourist destination across the entire impressive continent of North America is actually a sacred site. Indeed, Indigenous people once maintained the entire landscape as their sacred garden. Let us hold that in our minds as we pressure policy-makers to steward our lands and waters as if they were still sacred.*

Hóy7sxwq’e (Thank you/We are done now).



DETAIL OF “XÍCIL KÁYΘ” (“ANGRY GRANDMOTHER”), CARVED AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAMUEL BARR/GUEMESISLANDART.ORG/HOMEPAGE/SAM-BARR

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**SAMUEL BARR**, a tribal citizen of the Samish Indian Nation, serves as codirector of the Coast Salish Youth Stewardship Corps with The Madrona Institute. Barr was the Tribal Canoe Skipper for the Samish Indian Nation Canoe Family & Stillaguamish Canoe family, and has been a geographic information system (GIS) analyst/natural resources technician for the Samish Indian Nation Department of Natural Resources. He has a BA in environmental science and resource management from the University of Washington, and is additionally employed by the Stillaguamish Indian Tribe as a tribal historic preservation office supervisor. Barr is also an artist, and his work can be found at [guemesislandart.org/homepage/sam-barr/](http://guemesislandart.org/homepage/sam-barr/).

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# Rethinking Food Culture Might Save Us

*by Jovida Ross, Shizue Roche Adachi, and Julie Quiroz*

Food culture consists of the relationships and experiences we engage through food—the way food shapes our experiences of the world and of ourselves and each other.

*This article was first published by NPQ on April 4, 2022, and is republished here with minor alterations.*

**Food changes into blood, blood into cells, cells change into energy which changes up into life . . . food is life.**

—Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, culinary griot

**This work we're doing in food culture is ultimately healing work. And those foods, and seeds, and the land are the agents of healing: They are the healers, they are the curanderas, they are the medicine people who are increasing our capacity to look at the grief all around us . . . it's only the seeds, and the land, and the food, that have the capacity to take that grief, and to metabolize and digest it.**

—Rowen White, Mohawk seedkeeper, writer, culture worker

Imagine a future where the ways we grow, cook, and gather around food affirm our relationships to the places we live, to the people who came before us, and to future generations. Imagine a future where we recognize care as the essence of all labor and appreciate all people's labor, no matter the form it takes. Imagine that we joyfully nourish each other, that we all know we belong, and that we recognize and as kin. What images come to mind? What longing is sparked in us?



**A respectful, reciprocal food culture can help us imagine, build, and sustain possibilities for a more equitable future, in which our world's natural abundance is shared.**

Right now, we are living through escalating crises, both within living ecologies and socially constructed systems.<sup>1</sup> A dominant worldview shaped by settler colonialism and white supremacy has proliferated practices of extraction and exploitation that benefit few at the expense of many. Our commercial food system is an expression of this. Industrialized supply chains abuse people and the planet, feeding exploitation and injustice.

But systems and practices do not exist in a vacuum; they are an expression of the culture that underpins them. As many Black, Indigenous, and diasporic people of color food leaders have long asserted, dominant food narratives—from bootstrapping<sup>2</sup> to “you are what you eat” diet shaming<sup>3</sup>—often explicitly affirm logics of individualism, ignoring structural inequities and oppression and perpetuating support for massive globalized, profit-driven food industries that kill people and destroy ecologies.<sup>4</sup> To transform our food system, address our legacies of harm, and interrupt our reckless relationship to ecosystems, we need to look beyond food supply chains to the culture underpinning how we produce and share food. We need to advance narratives that celebrate interdependency and care. Stated otherwise, we need to transform our food *culture*.

Food culture consists of the relationships and experiences we engage through food—the way food shapes our experiences of the world and of ourselves and each other. A respectful, reciprocal food culture can help us imagine, build, and sustain possibilities for a more equitable future, in which our world's natural abundance is shared. Food-culture organizers, predominantly Black, Indigenous, and diasporic people of color, are already inviting us to engage with food as life force, as culture. They remind us that food culture is a powerful organizing force that feeds the body, lives in embodied

relationships, and animates the world. Food is a world-builder and place-maker, and the way many of us find a sense of home and belonging. As such, when we transform food culture, we transform culture as a whole—from how we relate to one another, to our stories of who we are, and our visions for who we can become. In the process, we empower ourselves to transform the systems that govern our world.

**SETTING THE TABLE: FOOD AS TEACHER, FOOD AS HEALER**

“People want to put us in boxes all the time,” Mohawk seed-keeper, writer, and activist Rowen White tells a crowd of squares assembled on Zoom. Last November, our organization, Food Culture Collective (previously Real Food Real Stories), hosted a conversation between White and Black liberation cook-activist Jocelyn Jackson, for a virtual *Around the Table* event on decolonizing food culture.<sup>5</sup> These two visionary food-culture workers lit up the screen and the hearts of those listening with their descriptions of “storied” food cultures that nourish complexity and accountability. “[People] always say, *she does food systems work*,” White continued, “and I’m like, I don’t do food systems work! I do something way more *expansive* than that.”

A passionate advocate for Indigenous seed and food sovereignty, White serves as the educational director and lead mentor of Sierra Seeds, a cooperative seed company committed to cultivating a network of seed stewards in Northern California. She is also the founder of the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network. White frames her work as a lifelong “apprenticeship to seeds.” Through seeds, she sees a path of “rehydrating” cultural values of reciprocity, care, and collective nourishment—those “original agreements” that affirm a symbiotic relationship among all beings. In her workshops, speeches, and writings on seeds, culture, and ancestral knowledge, White invites the public into a deeper, reciprocal relationship with the land.

Jocelyn Jackson—cofounder of the People’s Kitchen Collective, a community dining and political education project based in Oakland, California—has often experienced the true breadth, impact, and political clarity of her work shoe-horned into expected categories. She’s been described as

everything from a dietician to a culinary instructor—in fact, Jackson is a culture worker who uses recipes, ingredients, and shared meals to dialogue with ancestors, claim collective power, and evoke visions of justice. With a background in law and education, Jackson founded JUSTUS Kitchen to create healing food experiences that inspire folks to reconnect with themselves, the earth, and one another, inviting us to grow together toward collective liberation.

For example, in 2021, Jackson launched an interactive, virtual tablescape, “Fixed Price Menu,” in partnership with ARRAY Alliance and the Law Enforcement Accountability Project (LEAP).<sup>6</sup> Jackson created the conceptual menu and table setting for Philando Castile, the thirty-two-year-old Black man killed by police, and Jeronimo Yanez, the officer who murdered him. At Yanez’s place setting she put some of Castile’s favorite foods—honoring Castile’s humanity. In this way Jackson asked, “What culture did Yanez feed on that would allow him to take life so swiftly?”

Using food as an art form—as a way to reflect on how Castile’s and Yanez’s story unfolded—Jackson invited audiences to cook the recipes, contemplate the story, and consider our own responsibility and accountability. As Jackson explained in our *Around the Table* conversation, “That’s ultimately what’s going on every time we eat a meal. We’re talking about a liberation moment. We’re talking about a cultural moment. We’re talking about a sacred moment.” It was fortifying, Jackson told us, to have food recognized as playing an essential role in exploring police brutality, abolition, and accountability.<sup>7</sup>

Both Jackson and White are part of a growing movement around food-culture reclamation and revitalization that is challenging how we think about food systems change. Supply-chain systems analysis reduces food to nutrients, narrowing our understanding of the many ways that food shapes our lives. In contrast, food-culture bearers, organizers, and creatives recognize that food is intersectional—inexorably tied to practices of healing, identity formation, belonging,<sup>8</sup> and placemaking. Food-culture work offers us a praxis with which to affirm our mutuality with each other and the ecologies that feed us as we grow our collective well-being. This work has the potential to shift our global trajectory away from escalating social and climate chaos. To borrow the language of visionary author Toni Cade Bambara, food offers us the seeds and rich soil to shift our worldview and cultivate an irresistible future.

## CHALLENGING WHITE SUPREMACIST LOGIC

U.S. food systems are fundamentally shaped by violent land grabs<sup>9</sup> and plantation economies,<sup>10</sup> growing into today’s megacorporations that produce ecologically destructive and nutritionally empty food for a buck.<sup>11</sup> The same colonial logic that established and upheld these violent systems has shaped how most of us think and talk about food, including the development of a “good food movement” that reinforces systemic inequities and a racial hierarchy that prioritizes whiteness.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, what is often described as the organic, sustainable, slow, good, or *regenerative* food movement has celebrated mostly white farmers and chefs who championed fresh, “wholesome” food, often without acknowledging the legacies of institutionalized racism and land theft that facilitated these white farmers’ and food leaders’ access to resources.<sup>13</sup> Nor has the movement adequately acknowledged the Black, Indigenous, and diasporic communities of color whose work and leadership it drew from. For example, the Black origins of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) were eclipsed by white farmers,<sup>14</sup> and Indigenous fights against government-provided commodity foods were marginalized.<sup>15</sup> This has had tangible physical and economic repercussions for entire communities. For example, when public and business decision makers underinvest in Black or Immigrant neighborhoods and tribal communities, they create conditions of food apartheid.<sup>16</sup>

One potent example of such selective celebration illustrates the problem. Around the same time that Alice Waters was solidifying her position as the “mother of farm-to-table,”<sup>17</sup> Black culinary griot, anthropologist, and artist Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor published her seminal autobiographical cookbook and memoir, *Vibration Cooking: Or, the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*.<sup>18</sup> In this groundbreaking work, Smart-Grosvenor wove together “recipes” evoking instinctual and inherited knowledge with stories of her upbringing in South Carolina’s Lowcountry and commentaries on cultural dynamics, from culinary appropriation to gentrification.

When the third edition of the book was published, in 1992, Smart-Grosvenor described it as a book that “slipped through the cracks for more than two decades and lived.”<sup>19</sup> White critics struggled to categorize the book and were unsure of how to describe Smart-Grosvenor. Even in her 2016 *New York Times* obituary, Smart-Grosvenor was described as someone “who *liked* to call herself a ‘culinary

## When we approach food work as cultural work, we are able to crack open, reimagine, and rewrite the implicit assumptions of fiercely held narratives, transforming the shared spaces, practices, and norms that make up culture.

griot” (emphasis added), implicitly casting doubt on the validity of her work.<sup>20</sup>

The white-dominated narratives of the “food movement” have failed to give essential lineage holders of food-culture work, like Smart-Grosvenor, their due. Generations of vital Black, Indigenous, and diasporic people of color—led food-culture work have been underresourced and overshadowed—with the expertise of food-culture workers unfairly questioned, and their access to funding and infrastructure support unfairly constrained. As White reminds us, “Colonial culture tries to make what we do smaller, or fit it into their paradigm, or their understanding of what it is.”<sup>21</sup> Crucially, many BIPOC food-culture workers whose work has been diminished or dismissed offer a powerful map toward a food culture that affirms reciprocity and mutual belonging, and ensures a livable future.

### FOOD IS CULTURE

Over the past decade, growing numbers of organizations across issues and sectors have recognized that systems are rooted in culture and that systems change requires a cultural shift.<sup>22</sup> To quote Jeff Chang in “A Conversation about Cultural Strategy,”

. . . culture has two definitions: (1) The prevailing beliefs, values and customs of a group; a group’s way of life. (2) A set of practices (including all forms of storytelling and artmaking) that contain, transmit, or express ideas, values, habits and behaviors between individuals and groups.<sup>23</sup>

When we understand culture as beliefs, values, customs, and practices, we see how our beliefs and practices around food are culture, and how our intentionality around food culture is crucial to creating a sustainable, just, and joyful world.

Our current food system is an expression of the core values of dominant food culture. So, to heal our food system, we must heal our shared food culture. At a 2021 Food Culture Collective storytelling gathering, food scholar, writer, and editor of the seminal anthology *Sistah Vegan*,<sup>24</sup> A. Breeze Harper put it simply: “Racial justice, decolonization, and a sustainable food system cannot exist in—or on—soil that continues to be ‘purified’ through white supremacy and monocultural belief systems.”<sup>25</sup> When we approach food work as cultural work, we are able to crack open, reimagine, and rewrite the implicit assumptions of fiercely held narratives, transforming the shared spaces, practices, and norms that make up culture.

Speaking to the centrality of storytelling in her approach to food work, Black food scholar-activist Lindsey Lunsford recently told us, “The things that come natural are easy to write off as being unimportant or nonsubstantial.”<sup>26</sup> In the same way that humans couldn’t describe the color blue before we began producing blue pigment—despite the fact that the fundamental elements of air and water are now defined by the hue—food-culture work has always been fundamental to our world, even if our colonized languages and worldviews haven’t allowed some of us to “see” it.

Understanding food work as cultural work calls many people and communities into the movement to collectively reclaim and transform our relationship to food, at all scales. A food systems analysis invited consumers to ask: Where does your food come from? Food-culture work calls us all into the question: What culture do we feed?

### BRINGING NARRATIVES OF WHOLENESS TO LIFE

Food-culture work is necessary to alter existing extractive and exploitative power structures. Unlike a “vote-with-your-fork” politic that centers consumption as the space of action, food-culture work affirms our individual and collective power to shape culture *beyond* consumption.<sup>27</sup>

Indigenous communities and leaders have long offered an understanding of human relationship to food and land as sacred, in ways that are profoundly distinct from the

**Indigenous communities and leaders have long offered an understanding of human relationship to food and land as sacred, in ways that are profoundly distinct from the worldviews that dominate food culture in the United States.**

worldviews that dominate food culture in the United States. “There’s a circle of relationships that happen in our territories that people have forgotten about, about how we live in reciprocity and don’t take more than we need,” Corinna Gould—Lisjan Ohlone leader, community spokeswoman, and cofounder of the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust—told a Food Culture Collective audience in 2020. Gould and the women of Sogorea Te’ have played a leading role in defining rematriation as a practice that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous people and stewardship.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the legal term “repatriate,” which is defined by a transfer of ownership, “rematriate” includes a more profound practice of healing and decolonization. This work offers cultural transformation far beyond the territories of the Lisjan Ohlone people on the eastern shores of the San Francisco Bay; Sogorea Te’s modeling invites us all to inhabit narratives of care and abundance to heal our soils, our communities, and our relationships with all our living relations (human and beyond)—including #LandBack to Indigenous stewardship.<sup>29</sup>

Nikiko Masumoto, a third-generation Japanese-American peach farmer, queer writer, and performance artist, offers another example of a land-based food-culture practitioner cultivating transformational narratives in her work. Both Masumoto’s organic farming practice and her creative work nourish stories of belonging and wholeness alive in the Central Valley of California, which she calls home. As she shared with a Food Culture Collective audience in 2016, her food work invites others into an understanding of the “cultural landscape that is already embedded, but often erased, in the food that we eat.” The land Masumoto now farms was originally purchased by her grandfather a few years after he, like so many Japanese Americans, was incarcerated in an internment camp. Prior to World War II, Masumoto’s grandfather had worked as a farmhand; anti-Asian immigration laws had prevented many Asian Americans from owning land, and resentment of the Japanese community’s ownership stake in agricultural land directly fueled the political justification for internment and forcible removal.<sup>30</sup> As Masumoto told a reporter in 2017, she is a descendant of her grandfather’s “resilience to really claim a place of belonging.”<sup>31</sup>

Land-based food-culture workers like White, Gould, and Masumoto go beyond connecting us to the land; they connect us to the stories and legacies embedded in the soils we cultivate. “What does it look like to weave in the stories of

the people, of the land, who feed us?” wondered Pandora Thomas, founder of EarthSEED Permaculture Center and Farm, on a phone call this winter. Founded with a powerful cultural intention, EarthSEED is a 14-acre solar-powered organic farm, orchard, and educational center in Sonoma County, California, stewarded with Afro-Indigenous permaculture principles. “We sing, we celebrate, we mourn,” she continued—“there’s all this cultural beauty that is expressed in bringing food from the ground to our lives.”

This celebration and witnessing of the cultural aspects of food, farming, and land stewardship are clearly something we’re hungering for. The last decade has seen a broader public embrace food-culture figures, from Anishinaabe botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, whose 2013 *Braiding Sweetgrass* became a national best seller, to Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm, whose 2018 guide-meets-manifesto, *Farming While Black*, spoke to the work of reclaiming dignity as Black agriculturalists.<sup>32</sup> Both works have resonated with an audience that reaches far beyond people working directly in food and farming, demonstrating a broad appetite for culturally based approaches to land and farming.

This work of renewing and healing relationships with the land is growing along with a wave of people reclaiming and reviving ancestral culinary traditions. Indigenous writers like Devon Abbott Mihesuah (*Recovering Our Ancestors’ Gardens*, 2005)<sup>33</sup> and Black writers like Jessica Harris (*High on the Hog*, 2012, which served as the foundation for last year’s hit Netflix series hosted by Stephen Satterfield)<sup>34</sup> and Bryant Terry (starting with *Grub*, in 2006, and, most recently, *Black Food*,

in 2021)<sup>35</sup> have elevated and centered foodways that have been intentionally suppressed and erased in U.S. history. In 2015, Luz Calvo and Catriona Esquibel took up the call to *Decolonize Your Diet* with a cookbook reclaiming health-giving Mesoamerican foods.<sup>36</sup> Numerous ancestral food projects have sprung up in the intervening years. Two of the best known are from Sean Sherman and team at The Sioux Chef, and Michael Twitty's *Afroculinaria*;<sup>37</sup> there are many more. These cultural food projects are not just about preserving traditional foodways—by resurfacing a relationship to food that celebrates sovereignty and reciprocity, we expand our capacity to dream into decolonized visions of the future.

At a 2019 Food Culture Collective event, Filipina-American chef, educator, and activist Aileen Suzara asked the audience, “Is it possible to recover the things that you were supposed to forget?” Suzara was called to food work as a means of reckoning with the aftershocks of colonization and military occupation she witnessed in her family. In 2017, Suzara founded Sariwa, a project celebrating the healing properties of Filipino food. Like many immigrant families, the pressure to assimilate had forcibly distanced Suzara from her ancestors' traditional foodways and the experience of belonging embedded within them. Her longing for an ancestral connection with food resonates with many living in diaspora; food has long been weaponized as a tool of oppression, dispossession, and forced assimilation by ruling powers. For Suzara and other BIPOC food-culture workers, food is a pathway for people to collectively remember the past, to “change a painful narrative” shaped by settler colonialism that perpetuates shame, trauma, and erasure—to reclaim power and nourish narratives that honor their communities' history and agency in authoring their futures.

Shane Bernardo, a Detroit-based culture and community organizer, echoed Suzara on a call this winter: “When we are able to talk about our stories in a less isolated way, we take our power back. . . . The most powerful thing is that we are able to take our power back and stop being victims.” In his work as cofounder of Food As Healing, Bernardo seeks to reestablish a sacred relationship to land and food, and make explicit the connection between community health and dominant systems of harm. Bernardo, who grew up working in his Philippine family's grocery store, “came into the knowing of this work” after his father became an ancestor in 2010. “When my father passed on,” said Bernardo, “I saw how the chronic health diseases of a person in the diaspora are

connected to the displacement of my people and my ancestors. The work of reclaiming my people's foodways has my people's blood on it.” When we reclaim our practices, moving beyond dominant systems and white supremacist logic, we can achieve, in Bernardo's words, the “ecosystem shift” we need to truly heal.

## RENEWING A GENEROUS STORY OF FOOD

We—the writers of this essay—are women working in food and cultural strategy, one white and two mixed-race. We write from a place of longing, with gratitude for those doing culturally based food work, and with our own sense of accountability. Two of us, Jovida and Shizue, have had the privilege in our work at Food Culture Collective to facilitate, amplify, and platform farmers, organizers, healers, foodmakers, chefs, elders, and creatives. Through the personal stories these individuals shared with us, they have made it clear that a framework of “fixing our food system” does not do justice to their sense of purpose or intended impact. In addition, we—Jovida and Shizue—are based in the Bay Area, California, where the farm-to-table narrative was coined, and both of our parents were (at least tangentially) active in the white-centered back-to-the-land farming movement of the '60s and '70s. We have an intimate understanding of the blindspots and limitations of the food narratives we inherited and were poised to perpetuate. Our cowriter, Julie, weaves in insights from her work growing transformative cultural and economic power, her mixed Ecuadorian-American identity, and her perspective from Michigan, home to vibrant Black- and Indigenous-led food movements.

We do food-culture work not to change how we eat but to change how we live. We each have struggled to feel connected to our ancestral cultures—a struggle tied to a long history of forced assimilation and imperialism. This is true for Shizue in relationship to her Japanese ancestors and for Julie in relationship to her Ecuadorian roots—it's also true for each of us in connection to the cultural traditions of Celtic, Germanic, and English peoples in our respective family trees, and for Jovida in connection to her Ashkenazi ancestors: the living expression of our families' cultures were lost to the flattening power of assimilation into whiteness.<sup>38</sup> In those ancestral threads lie the memories of a different relationship to food, land, and belonging. As White reminds us, the seeds of ancestral wisdom within us are waiting to be rehydrated.

At the Food Culture Collective roundtable last November, White explained how she dislikes the phrase *food system* because it “feels sterile, reductionist, and hollow . . . it was birthed out of the same forces that created the destruction of the beautifully storied cultures that we all descend from.” Instead, she seeks to affirm the powerful, expansive, intersectional role of food in our lives. White encourages us to reclaim a relationship to food that embraces our storied lineages—lineages that affirm a food culture rooted in the belief that care for all people, lands, and waters is possible.<sup>39</sup>

Food-culture workers have been guiding our way; to get there, we all need to be part of shaping it. Food-culture work is dynamic and evolving, its impacts as far-reaching and diverse as its practitioners. Embracing food culture as an orientation to food transformation requires a shift in how we think about and relate to food at an elemental level, not simply in our terminology. The first step in this process is to witness and recognize food-culture work being done around us—and to center the leadership of people revitalizing and reimagining culturally based food and land practices.

Food-culture work offers a dynamic and intersectional approach to addressing the most critical issues of our time—from climate justice and global health, to policing and gun violence, to land reclamation and food sovereignty, and far beyond. In the words of Black food scholar, culture worker, and visionary thought leader Psyche Williams-Forsyth, “Demanding what sustains us culturally . . . in ways that will allow us to thrive and be whole, comforted, satiated and alive is not a fight from which we should shrink.”<sup>40</sup>

To transform how we live, and ensure a healthy future on this planet, we need to *shift power* away from the cultures that support exploitation and destruction toward cultures that instead nourish our collective healing, liberation, and joy. For those wondering how to begin, we offer a few suggestions:

**Listen:** Give generous attention, while being open to learning something unexpected.

■ **For those who identify as Black, Indigenous, and diasporic people of color:** Remember that everyone has the power to embrace multiple ways of knowing, and listen to their intuition and wisdom.<sup>41</sup> White supremacist culture has taught us not to do that, but that’s exactly what we need to do. As Rowen White reminds us, there are many ways into cultural rehydration, re-enlivening the “deep intelligences

inside our bodies” to nourish our healing, joy, and visions for the future.

■ **For people who identify as white:** Remember that white people have also experienced disconnection from ancestral roots.<sup>42</sup> Everyone can listen to and learn from the echoes of our ancestors. Embracing pleasure and joy as we revive and remix our own culinary traditions is essential to rehydrating the wisdom embedded in our cells. White folks who do this inner listening might also discover grief over cultural loss or feel called to take stock of the painful, violent histories that their ancestors may have directly contributed to—or, at the very least, benefited from.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, it is vital that everyone listen to, witness, and appreciate the power and leadership of BIPOC food-culture workers, without fetishizing, tokenizing, or appropriating their cultural stories or lineages.

**Engage:** Consider, as we connect with food-culture work.

■ **For everyone:** Ask the question, How might we (re)claim our power to truly nourish ourselves and our communities, to shape our everyday lives, systems, and governance around mutual nourishment and care, around solidarity and celebration? When we orient toward what we want to create in the world, we can better identify opportunities to move toward our vision.

■ **For people working on food systems change:** Follow the wisdom and leadership of BIPOC food-culture keepers. Invest in cultural power—alongside economic and political power—as key to effective strategy. Practice naming the cultural context and power dynamics within which we work. How are we shifting power and resources to address structural harms? How are we aligning our organizational resources with values that support mutual flourishing?<sup>44</sup>

**Activate:** Move with awareness and purpose.

■ **For everyone:** Strengthen the muscles of reclaiming and reimagining food culture with creativity, joy, and connection. Be open to playfully exploring the ways we grow, cook, and gather around food.

White suggests, “Whether it’s seeds, or food, or in the kitchen, or art, or poetry, or whatever is your passion: you had ancestors that did that too . . . Whatever it is that your passion is, it’s the way that you stitch yourself back into that culture. And we need *all of us!*”<sup>45</sup> These inner signals can guide us in reweaving life-affirming relationships with land, water, food, and community.

■ **For people who identify as white:** Deepen and grow your understanding of how U.S. food systems are rooted in and shaped by a history of land theft, genocide, slavery, and imperialism. We must take active steps to rebalance power and repair past and ongoing violence and extraction. Ask questions like, How are we explicitly *acting on* our commitments to Black, Indigenous, and diasporic communities of color? Commit to a personal practice of accountability, reparations, and repatriation that could include paying a voluntary land tax,<sup>46</sup> channeling resources to BIPOC-led food-culture projects, and finding ways to follow and support BIPOC leadership without adding demands for time and attention.

■ **For people working in nonprofit organizations:** Now is the time for coalition building across issues and sectors. Join a network that embraces deep narrative and cultural strategies, or collaborate across food, arts, culture, climate, and social justice spaces (just to name a few) to deepen relationships, cross-pollinate, and forward intersectional solutions that promise long-term transformation rather than short-term wins.<sup>47</sup>

Embrace innovative models of community wealth and economic self-determination, and resist the idea that grants are the best and only way to resource the work. As HEAL Food Alliance states clearly, “No single organization, alliance, or sector can transform the system working alone or in isolation; we need our diverse skills, resources, and bases.”<sup>48</sup>

■ **For people working in philanthropy:** Recognize and invest in cultural power—alongside economic and political power—as key to effective strategy. Invest in authentic partnerships with BIPOC food-culture workers and bearers who are leading, and have historically led, the work to reclaim and reimagine our relationship with food in service of our collective flourishing. (Re)Read the HEAL-led coalition open letter<sup>49</sup> and follow up,<sup>50</sup> and consider the questions posed there: How are you cultivating authentic partnership with BIPOC communities, ending inequitable grantmaking strategies, redirecting multiyear, unrestricted funding from white-led groups to BIPOC-led organizations, and examining your own endowment investments and funding trends?

There is a cultural reawakening happening all around us. We can choose to be a part of it—to nourish it in ourselves, support it in others, and honor and resource those leading the way. We all shape and create food culture. Once we recognize this, we can all work to cultivate a food culture rooted in celebration and solidarity, reorienting our collective trajectory toward a future of mutual flourishing.

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**JOVIDA ROSS** is the executive director of Food Culture Collective. Food Culture Collective's mission is to democratize food culture to feed our collective healing and transformation. Before joining the Food Culture Collective team, Ross spent over seven years as director of programs at Movement Strategy Center (MSC), where she cofounded The Transitions Initiative and led the design and facilitation of MSC's Transitions Labs. These BIPOC-centered cross-movement learning and strategy spaces gathered together more than two hundred social justice movement leaders from across the country to explore the question, How do we transition our world from domination and extraction to resilience, regeneration, and interdependence? With Ross's leadership, Food Culture Collective has come to clearly situate our work within a movement-building context, understanding that we work in concert with others whose visions align with ours. Many teachers and communities of practice have supported Ross's learning around embodiment practices, trauma stewardship and healing, and how personal and collective transformation are linked. Ross is particularly grateful for the guidance and mentorship of Kawelokū Norma Wong. **SHIZUE ROCHE ADACHI** is a storyteller, narrative strategist, and creative-at-large. Working across mediums, Adachi is dedicated to unspooling stories of pleasure, comfort, and belonging, stitched into the land and across generations. Her wide-ranging experience includes stints as a livestock farmer, independent radio producer, creative director, brand strategist, and director of operations for a young-farmer advocacy nonprofit. Adachi is an advisory board member of Food Culture Collective, where she previously held the position of narrative strategist. You can find her at [shizueheadachi.com](http://shizueheadachi.com). **JULIE QUIROZ** (she/her) is the founder and lead strategist of New Moon Collaborations, which nurtures leaps in culture to transform systems and structures for generations to come. Prior to New Moon, Quiroz served on the Movement Strategy Center (MSC) leadership team, which created the MSC Transitions Initiative to deepen transformative cultural power for Just Transition. In 2020, Quiroz helped spark the creation of Birth Center Equity, the first network of BIPOC-led community birth centers in the country, where she is now a strategy and narrative advisor. Quiroz is cofounder of the Untold Stories of Liberation & Love women of color poetry collective. She is the editor of Untold Stories' anthology *Love & Other Futures*. For more of Quiroz's writing, visit [www.newmooncollab.org/blog](http://www.newmooncollab.org/blog).

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# Fisheries and Stewardship

## Lessons from Native Hawaiian Aquaculture

■  
*Loko i'a* practice reflects a deep Indigenous understanding of the environmental, ecological, and social processes specific to our islands. In addition to today's work of reclaiming physical spaces, our collective work is to also reclaim the innovation and resilience inherent to our Indigenous ways of knowing, observing, managing, and thriving in our environment.

by Brenda Asuncion, Miwa Tamanaha, Kevin K. J. Chang, and Kim Moa

*This article is from a series, published by NPQ in partnership with the First Nations Development Institute (First Nations), that lifts up Native American voices to highlight issues concerning environmental justice in Indian Country. It was first published online, on March 31, 2020, and is republished here with minor alterations.*

**Fishponds, *loko i'a*, were things that beautified the land, and a land with many fishponds was called “fat” land (*‘āina momona*).**

—Samuel Kamakau,  
*Na Hana a ka Po‘e Kahiko:  
Works of the People of Old*



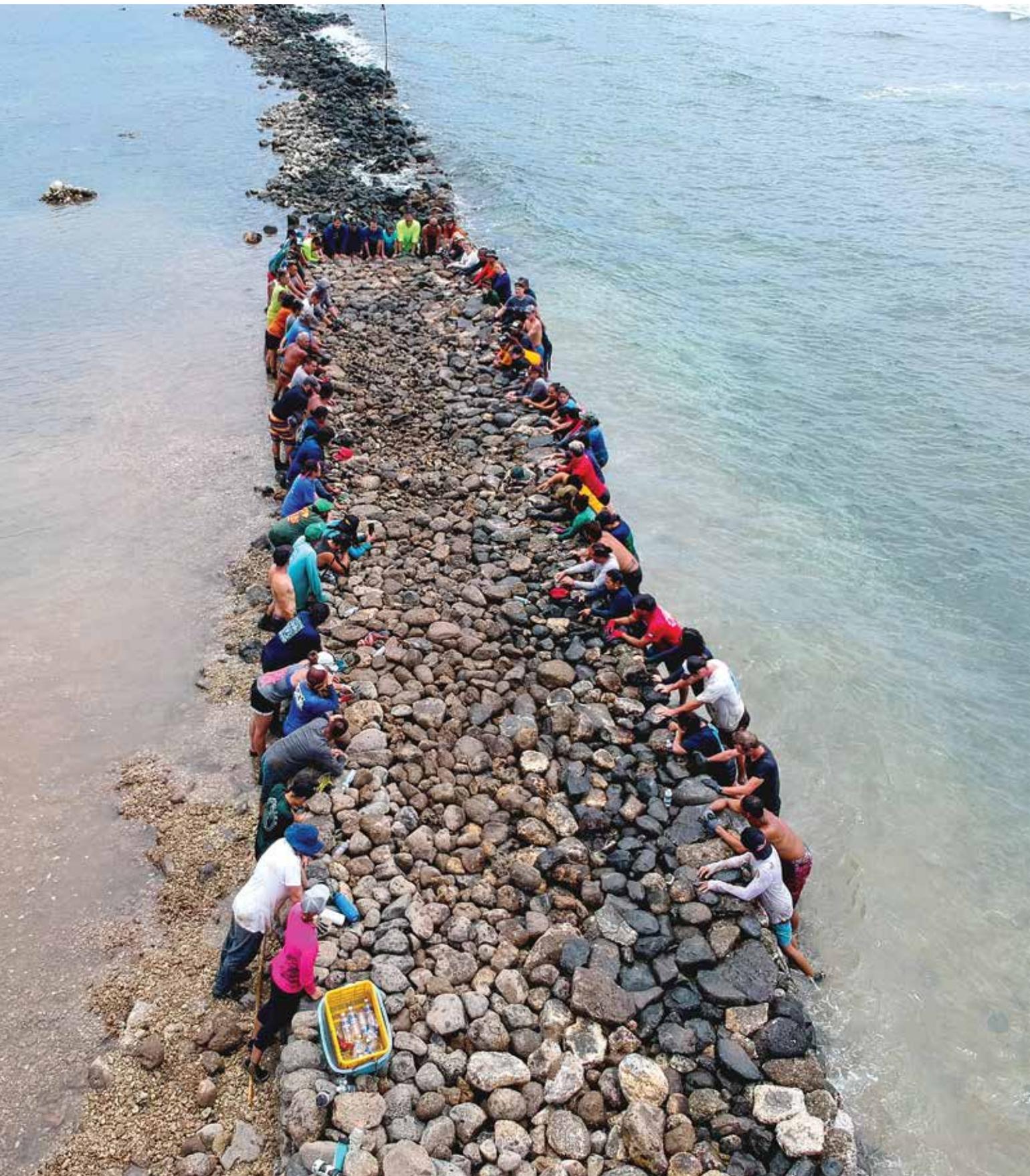


PHOTO BY SCOTT KANDA; COURTESY OF KUA'ĀINA ULU 'AUAMO (KUA)



## Hawai‘i’s traditional biocultural system for natural resource management once supported close to a million people—almost as many people as inhabit our state today—who relied entirely on island resources for survival.

*There are many lessons to be learned from Indigenous aquaculture practices, especially in the areas of climate mitigation, adaptation, resilience, resource management, and food sovereignty. Today, Native Hawaiians are working to reclaim physical spaces, improve resilience, and resurface Indigenous ways of knowing, observing, managing, and thriving in the Hawaiian island environment, drawing on practices that have been developed over many centuries.*

One of the most isolated archipelagos on the planet, Hawai‘i is about 2,500 miles away from any other place in the world. As the landscape’s spirit and history of our community are revived, so are the insightful and innovative practices of our Native Hawaiian ancestors. This knowledge, the lessons learned, and the people who practice them are stories of inspiration for our greater community and the global movement of Indigenous people and local communities of which they are a part.

Hawai‘i is home to some of the first known aquaculture practices in the Pacific. *Loko i‘a* (fishponds) are an advanced,

extensive form of aquaculture found nowhere else in the world.<sup>1</sup> While techniques of herding or trapping adult fish in shallow tidal areas, in estuaries, and along their inland migration can be found around the globe, Hawaiians developed *loko i‘a* that are technologically unique, advancing the cultivation practice of *mahi i‘a* (fish farmers). They exist as part of the traditional Native Hawaiian infrastructure for biocultural (integrated natural and cultural) resource abundance, or *‘āina momona* (which literally translates as “fat lands”). *‘Āina momona* stretch across and uplift the ecological and cultural functioning of the entire watershed, from mountaintop to nearshore. As Native Hawaiian historian Samuel M. Kamakau described, the existence of a *loko i‘a* within a functioning ecosystem or landscape alone indicates abundance.

Hawai‘i’s traditional biocultural system for natural resource management once supported close to a million people—almost as many people as inhabit our state today—who relied entirely on island resources for survival.<sup>2</sup> In this, *loko i‘a* served a sophisticated and essential role in protein production, producing an estimated 300 pounds of fish per acre per year.<sup>3</sup> Statewide surveys identified 488 *loko i‘a* on six of the main Hawaiian islands.<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 1.)

Hawaiian innovation is reflected in the variety of *loko i‘a* design and construction methods, demonstrating an unparalleled understanding of engineering, hydrology, ecology, biology, and agriculture managed holistically within watershed-scale land divisions called *ahupua‘a*.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, globalization and advancements in refrigeration and transportation transformed food production and thus environmental stewardship practices globally. In Hawai‘i, these forces, population

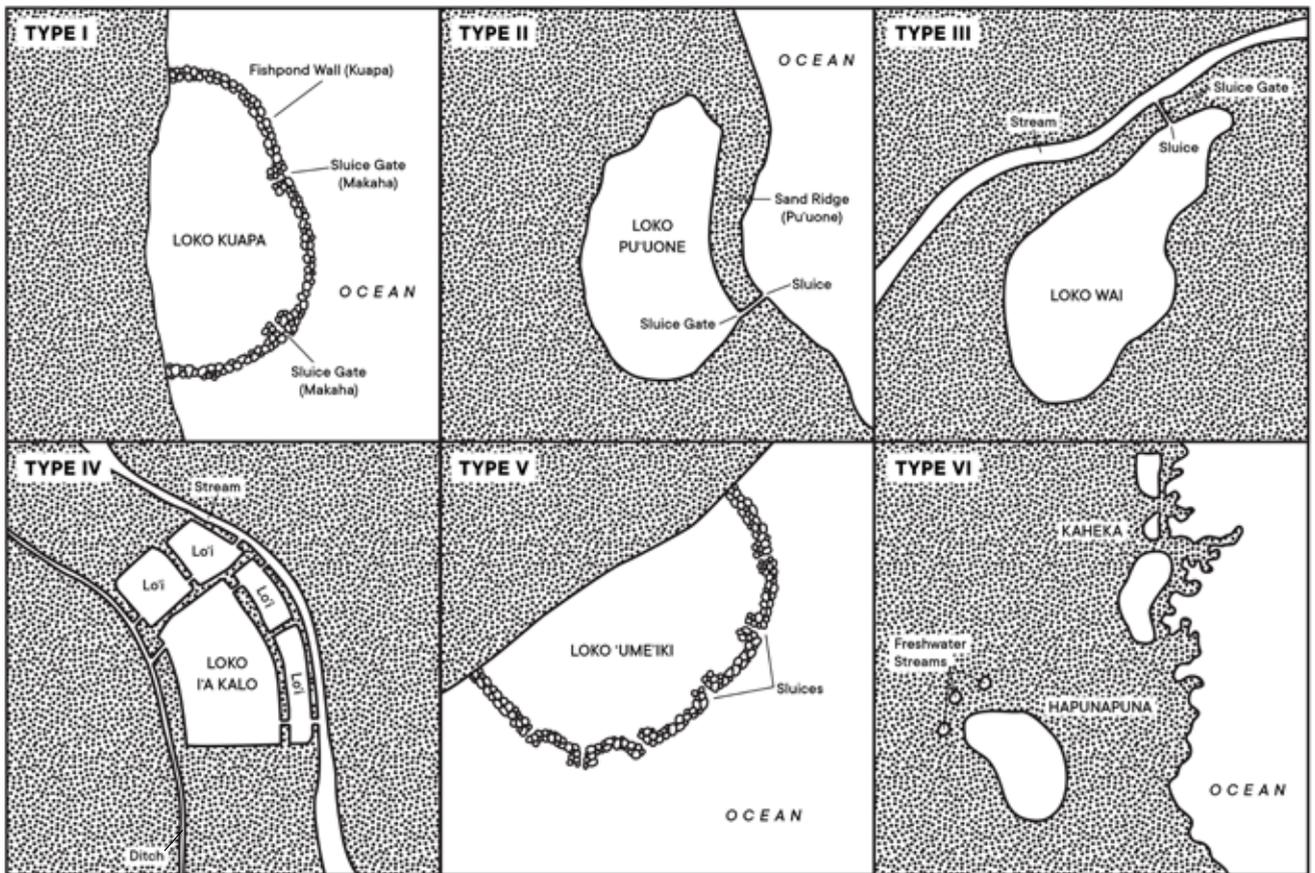


Figure 1: Today, rural and Native Hawaiian communities are building a movement to restore *loko i'a* and their surrounding near-shore environments. Image courtesy of the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

loss from introduced diseases, and rapid sociopolitical change, including the overthrow of the Hawaiian government by American plantation owners in 1893, drove dramatic changes to every aspect of Hawaiian life, including *loko i'a*.

Hawai'i's famed/infamous history of ranching, pineapple and sugar plantation agriculture, American military land use, and rapid urban development have decimated the infrastructure of a biocultural system that once functioned sustainably across watersheds, from our mountaintops and down to the sea. The loss of Native land tenure has resulted in alienation from traditional stewardship practices like *loko i'a*, limits to land access, distancing of communities from decision-making and civic engagement around natural resources, and rapid loss of knowledge and traditional practices of caring for these resources. Today, we suffer the predictable consequences of these circumstances.

The abundance of natural resources has declined severely in the last two hundred years. By some estimates, production from our fisheries and agriculture in native crops like

taro has fallen by as much as 90 percent. Ironically, an estimated 85 to 90 percent of the food eaten in Hawai'i comes in on a ship or barge.<sup>5</sup> Our *loko i'a* too are highly degraded. Some are completely covered and unrecognizable, while very few are used for food today. Yet reliance on natural resources endures in rural Hawaiian communities as a tradition that feeds families, creates a strong sense of a unified community, and binds together the social elements necessary for cultural perpetuation.<sup>6</sup>

Environmental justice speaks to the protection of people from environmental harms—and access to environmental goods—regardless of race, income, or color, and the equitable access to decision-making around environmental health and well-being. The ability of Indigenous communities around the globe to determine our destiny, our relationship to the water, land, and living things that sustain us—thus beats the ethic and very heart of environmental justice.

The 1970s and '80s saw a broad resurgence of a multiethnic and Native Hawaiian-led movement—known as the

Hawaiian Renaissance<sup>7</sup>—to reassert systems of Native Hawaiian language, health practices, and food production, including *loko i'a* practice. This movement continues to grow.

Today, rural and Native Hawaiian communities are building a movement to restore *loko i'a* and their surrounding near-shore environments (fisheries, coral, and seaweed beds), and remain steadfast in the knowledge that *loko i'a* maintain the potential to contribute to healthy and robust food and ecological systems. *Loko i'a* revitalization continues to move hand-in-hand with the revitalization of Hawaiian language, arts, architecture, and diet. Native Hawaiian values, knowledge, and practices around stewardship, management, care, and utility of our natural resources are becoming ever more important to how conservation and business is done in Hawai'i.

Restoration of *loko i'a* commonly targets other related issues of concern in our communities, ranging from community-based economic development to healing substance abuse. These efforts all stem from a common cultural ethic—epitomized in the Hawaiian word *lōkahi* (unity, harmony)—that holds that the health of people, culture, and place are all deeply entwined. We have seen that the revitalizing work of *loko i'a* restores our human communities, as well as our broader interwoven community of native and endangered plants, invertebrates, fishes, and birds.

**It was so beautiful for me to create and clean something and make it beautiful. My whole life, I've just destroyed things. It was just such a privilege to make something beautiful. Thank you for waking me up and helping me connect to my Hawaiian culture. I thought it was too late already. I thought my *kūpuna* (elders) had died and left me. I know now, my *kūpuna* are here. They are in me. I felt them today.**

—Reflection from a patient at a substance-abuse treatment center on working around *loko i'a* on Mokauea Island, Ke'ehi

The stewardship efforts of our communities to restore *loko i'a* and other local food production and manage our natural resources—healing our relationship to our places, ourselves, and each other—continue to face contemporary challenges that are complex and systemic. Generations of severed familial and community ties to land have decimated

the availability and perpetuation of precious traditional ecological knowledge for environmental stewardship and food production in our communities. What remains is highly vulnerable to loss, especially as our elder knowledge-holders age. The funding mechanisms to support these community groups are also vulnerable to reliance on well-intentioned intermediaries and funders who often have a limited time period or alignment to support the community's work. Existing local, state, and federal policies, institutions, and programs—generally designed from a Western, hierarchical paradigm of resource management—are often ill-suited to address the needs and demands of community-based stewardship practice and revival.

**One person standing alone has only one voice . . . it's not as strong as 100 people standing together.**

—Damien Kenison of Ho'okena, speaking to the power of networks

The formation of networks of Native fishers, farmers, families, and allies is a natural and powerful response to systemic and complex contemporary barriers. The formation of community-organized networks accelerated during the Hawaiian Renaissance, and continues through today. Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo (KUA) is a Native Hawaiian-led organization that serves as a facilitator of “networked work.” After ten years of stewarding this work, KUA was incorporated as a nonprofit in 2013, at the request of fishers, farmers, and community leaders from over thirty rural Hawaiian communities. In strategic planning meetings, these leaders affirmed each community's mandate to advance place-based natural resource stewardship, and that systemic barriers facing our communities can best be tackled collectively.

**The word *konohiki* means to invite ability [and] willingness. This refers to the ability of a *konohiki* to organize people for collective endeavors no one family could achieve alone, such as maintenance of irrigation systems to sustain taro patches or surround net harvests.**

—Carlos Andrade, *Hā'ena: Through the Eyes of the Ancestors*, 2008

More broadly, KUA honors the practice of *konohiki* in communities across our islands. Throughout Hawai'i today, grassroots groups and families continue to care for their places with Native Hawaiian values, culture, and intelligence.



**As we look to the future, we envision a revival of the famed abundance of *loko i'a*, while also contributing to a broader movement to reclaim Native intelligence and innovation in our land and food systems.**

Through place-based restoration and stewardship rooted in Indigenous science, practice, and a worldview inherently tied to *‘āina* (land, earth—literally, “that which feeds”), these efforts to care for our island home have meaningful and immediate ecological and social impact on the people and storied places of Hawai‘i.

In the face of many challenges, and in community self-determination and affirmation of our generational ties to land, Indigenous identity, and each other are the gravitational pull that turns the tide.

KUA’s primary work is to coordinate the people and physical resources needed to create resonance for conversations within and among the networks we facilitate. The Hui Mālama Loko i’a is one such network, made up of over sixty sites and a growing community of over one hundred *kia‘i loko* (fishpond guardians and caretakers).

In February 2020, 170 *kia‘i loko* and other Indigenous aquaculture leaders from around the Pacific convened in a historic gathering in He‘eia, O‘ahu for a four-day Indigenous aquaculture summit and cultural exchange. The gathering was hosted and led by community organizations Paepae o He‘eia and Kāko‘o ‘Ōiwi, with logistical, facilitation, and funding support from KUA and Hawai‘i Sea Grant. Participants engaged in discussions, skills exchange, and field trips to various other *loko i’a* across O‘ahu, and included a collective work project to restore 120 feet of *kuapā* (wall infrastructure) at He‘eia fishpond.

This gathering provided opportunities for Hawaiian practitioners to talk together about *loko i’a* practices and *wahi pana* (storied places), and builds on a partnership between Hawai‘i and Washington Sea Grant programs to support an

Indigenous aquaculture exchange in the Pacific Northwest, which began in 2022 and is ongoing.

The Indigenous aquaculture summit was held ahead of the Aquaculture America 2020 meeting in Honolulu, one of the largest aquaculture trade shows in the world.<sup>8</sup> The conference theme: *Hawai‘i Aquaculture: A Tradition of Navigating with Innovation, Technology and Culture*, was highlighted by plenary speaker Keli‘i Kotubetey, the assistant executive director at Paepae o He‘eia. “We build upon generations of knowledge that help inform our practice in today’s changing environment and economy,” said Kotubetey during the Indigenous summit at He‘eia. “Our *kūpuna* were experts in areas of climate mitigation, adaptation, resilience, resource management, and food sovereignty. We are excited to share this with the broader community.”

*Loko i’a* practice reflects a deep Indigenous understanding of the environmental, ecological, and social processes specific to our islands. In addition to today’s work of reclaiming physical spaces, our collective work is to also reclaim the innovation and resilience inherent to our Indigenous ways of knowing, observing, managing, and thriving in our environment. The work of the Hui Mālama Loko i’a gives voice to some of Hawai‘i’s most skilled and committed natural resource managers in using, sharing, and practicing traditional approaches to resource management to meet modern challenges and restore some of Hawai‘i’s most cherished places.

As we look to the future, we envision a revival of the famed abundance of *loko i’a*, while also contributing to a broader movement to reclaim Native intelligence and innovation in our land and food systems. Today, *loko i’a* serve as important *kīpuka*—which literally means oasis/oases, but figuratively

means receptacle(s)—for the renewal of traditional practices and values in contemporary ways; but the work of *loko i'a* caretakers (and many other Hawaiian subsistence practitioners) is systemically underresourced, undervalued, and overlooked.

The restoration of *loko i'a* provides inspiration for Native Hawaiians and the larger community to renew *'āina momona*, an abundant, productive ecological system that supports community well-being. The bigger need—and opportunity—is great: to grow and strengthen the social

and cultural infrastructure supporting traditional ecological knowledge and the capacity of Indigenous practitioners to share, teach, and perpetuate their work.

The name of our organization, Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo, means “grassroots growing through shared responsibility”; the acronym, KUA, means “back.” We believe that empowered community stewardship efforts lead to our vision of an abundant, productive ecological system that supports community well-being: *'ĀINA MOMONA*.

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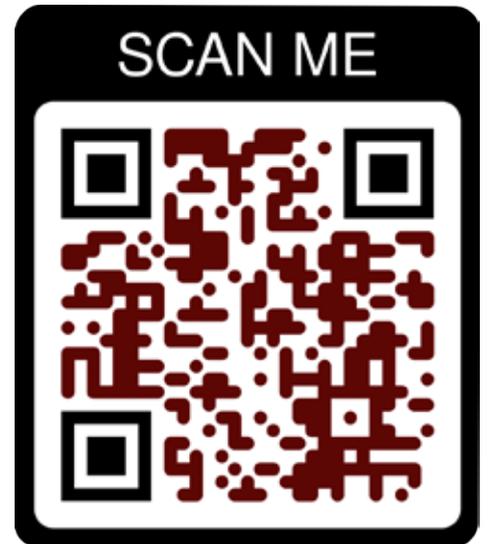
**BRENDA ASUNCION** was raised in Waipi'o, ('Ewa, O'ahu). Since 2013, Asuncion has served as the Hui Mālama Loko I'a coordinator for Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo (KUA), where she works with Native Hawaiian *loko i'a* practitioners to network and increase restoration efforts. **MIWA TAMANAHA** lives in Waipi'o, O'ahu, and is a cofounder and codirector emeritus of Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo (KUA). Tamanaha is currently serving in a residency in community-building with Hawai'i Investment Ready, where she continues to support *loko i'a* restoration efforts. **KEVIN K. J. CHANG** was born in Honolulu and is the codirector of Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo (KUA), where he supports movement networks for community-based natural resource management. **KIM MOA** was raised in 'Ewa, O'ahu. She is a member of the Ali'i Pauahi Hawaiian Civic Club, and serves as a *kia'i loko* (fishpond caretaker) for Loko I'a Pa'aiau in Kalauao, O'ahu, and was the communications coordinator for Kua'āina Ulu 'Auamo (KUA) from 2016 to 2022. A photographer by trade, Moa's body of work documenting grassroots community stewardship efforts across Hawai'i reflects her passion for social justice and visual storytelling through an Indigenous lens.

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# What Does Tribal Land Stewardship Look Like?

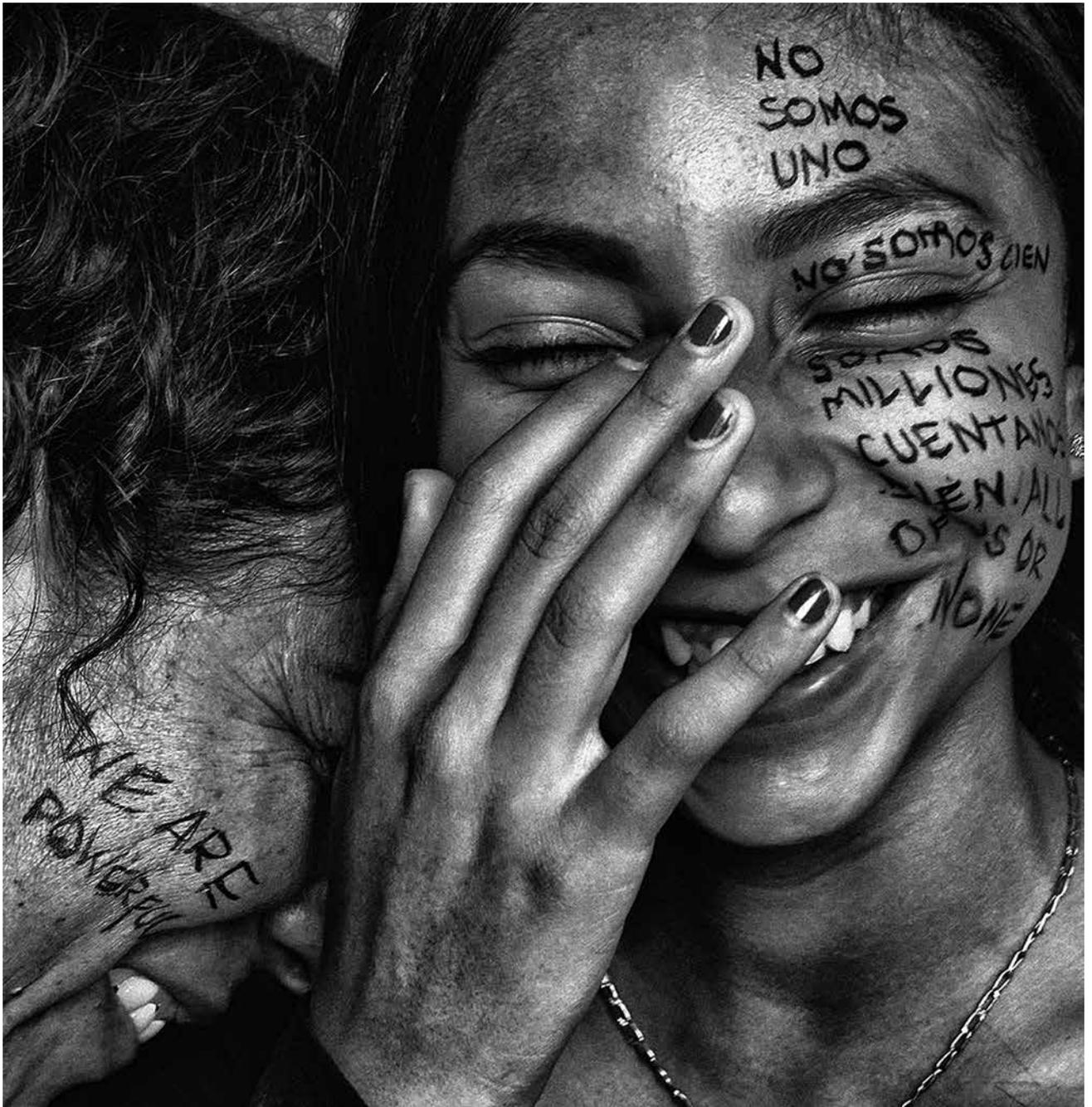
*by Steve Dubb*

*This article was first published by NPQ on May 1, 2022, and is republished here with minor alterations.*

**The climate crisis is not only a product of greenhouse gas emissions . . .  
but also of an ideological shift that was imposed by colonization and  
capitalism to justify violation of sacred land-, water-, and airways—domination  
that taught Americans to speak of “resources” instead of “relatives.”**

—Ruth Miller, Meda Dewitt, and Margi Dashevsky<sup>1</sup>

**T**o understand Native land stewardship, it is important to recognize that it occurs within a context of repairing the ravages of colonialism. A new report, *Models of Holistic Tribal Land Stewardship in the Northern Great Plains*, published by the First Nations Development Institute and authored by Mary Adelzadeh, examines these themes as it highlights efforts by four Native nations in Montana and South Dakota to restore stewardship principles to land management.<sup>2</sup>



- Raymond Foxworth of First Nations noted in *NPQ* that “Native people have long held a worldview that connects human and community health to the health of land and the environment. It shapes and perpetuates Native identities, cultures, and worldviews.” This worldview can be summarized as one that centers the notion of stewardship rather than resource extraction.

The report offers some lessons learned from a project, “Mapping Ecological Stewardship Opportunities,” that was supported by Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies. The resources involved were modest (\$240,000 total) but the ambition was large—namely, to assist Native nations to “regain control of their land and natural resources, revitalize traditional stewardship practices, and build sustainable stewardship initiatives that contribute to tribal economic and community development opportunities.”<sup>3</sup>

The costs of resource extraction for Native American communities are hard to overstate. To take just one example, between 1944 and 1986, nearly 30 million tons of radioactive uranium ore were mined from Navajo lands, leading to elevated levels of birth defects, kidney failure, and cancer in Navajo communities.<sup>4</sup> Testifying to Congress in 2019, Navajo President Jonathan Nez noted that “prior to uranium mining, the Navajo people were virtually cancer free with the lowest lung cancer rate of all Native American nations. Today, cancer is the second leading cause of mortality among the Navajo people. Cancer rates doubled on the Navajo Nation from the 1970s to the 1990s.”<sup>5</sup>

The climate crisis brings new pressures. As Christopher Flavelle and Kalen Goodluck of the *New York Times* remind readers, settler colonialism sought to confine Native communities to “marginal” lands. Today, these lands are often disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. As Flavelle and Goodluck detail, “In the Pacific Northwest, coastal erosion and storms are eating away at tribal land, forcing native communities to try to move inland. In the Southwest, severe drought means the Navajo Nation is running out of drinking water. At the edge of the Ozarks, heirloom crops are becoming harder to grow, threatening to disconnect the Cherokee from their heritage.”<sup>6</sup>

There is a deep irony in this situation, as the climate emergency’s effects fall on those least responsible for their occurrence. Indeed, the principles of resource stewardship long championed in many Native American communities are critical to restoring environmental balance.<sup>7</sup> For example, as fire archaeologist Hillary Renick has noted in *NPQ*, as mass wildfires fueled by the climate crisis become increasingly common, “there is widespread scientific acknowledgment that Indigenous fire ecology practices are both appropriate and environmentally necessary.”<sup>8</sup> Still, she adds, “fire

ecology efforts must deal with the legacy of a century of fire ecology mismanagement, a challenge that has been greatly exacerbated by climate change.”<sup>9</sup>

Two years ago, Raymond Foxworth of First Nations noted in *NPQ* that “Native people have long held a worldview that connects human and community health to the health of land and the environment. It shapes and perpetuates Native identities, cultures, and worldviews.”<sup>10</sup> This worldview can be summarized as one that centers the notion of stewardship rather than resource extraction.

## OVERVIEW OF STEWARDSHIP CHALLENGES

Adelzadeh’s report looks at four communities. The Lower Brule Sioux Nation of South Dakota is housed on 132,601 acres of land (over 200 square miles).<sup>11</sup> A key challenge for the Lower Brule Sioux is preserving native wildlife, such as the pronghorn antelope. A pilot program of coyote sterilization shows promising results. The tribal nation also aspires to implement what would be the first grasslands carbon sequestration project in the United States.

In North-Central Montana, the Chippewa Cree Nation, with 122,000 acres of land (over 190 square miles), has similar ambitions.<sup>12</sup> One of the tribal nation’s goals is to develop “baseline maps to protect and restore sensitive areas and resources such as medicinal plants, riparian areas, waterways, and wildlife corridors.”<sup>13</sup> The Chippewa Cree are also seeking to implement a forest carbon sequestration project.

The third community at Fort Belknap, also in North-Central Montana, has 650,000 acres of land (over 1,000 square miles). It is jointly governed by members of the Nakoda and Aaniiih nations, and includes a 22,000-acre (over 34,000 square miles) bison reserve, home to a herd of over 500 buffalo. In 2014, the tribe founded the Nakoda Aaniiih Economic Development Corporation (NAEDC), a Native-led nonprofit that supports tribal ecotourism, business development, and ecological preservation.<sup>14</sup>

The fourth community is the Crow Nation, with 2.2 million acres of land (over 3,400 square miles). The Crow are Montana’s largest Native community. Like the Nakoda and Aaniiih, the Crow formed a nonprofit, known as Center Pole.

***[The] principles of resource stewardship long championed  
in many Native American communities are critical  
to restoring environmental balance.***

Founded in 1999 and similar in mission to NAEDC, the non-profit supports ecotourism while also promoting “food sovereignty and ecological stewardship.”<sup>15</sup>

**THREE THEMES: HOLISTIC STEWARDSHIP, SOVEREIGNTY, AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

As the descriptions above make clear, the four communities in the study share some common challenges: all are small—enrolled tribal membership ranges from 4,354 for the Lower Brule Sioux to 14,343 for the Crow;<sup>16</sup> and each nation seeks to balance ecological and economic concerns, the latter of which should not be underestimated in these heavily rural communities. A Montana State study from 2019 estimated that the poverty rate statewide for Native communities exceeded 30 percent.<sup>17</sup>

In her report, Adelzadeh notes that “Western funding models tend to be linear and directed narrowly toward ecological endpoints of restoration.”<sup>18</sup> The call for holistic models of stewardship is not just rhetorical; models that care for both land and people, she points out, “are more likely to be sustained and to achieve [their] goals over the long term.”<sup>19</sup>

A second theme is the centrality of Indigenous sovereignty to stewardship. A sovereignty focus has many implications. One is control over data. Another facet is food sovereignty, including “reclaiming Native food traditions.”<sup>20</sup> As Adelzadeh notes, Center Pole, the Crow economic development non-profit, seeks to “restore traditional food systems by restoring Native grasslands and plants used for traditional foods and medicine.”<sup>21</sup> A sovereignty lens is also critical to successful ecotourism development. Absent Indigenous ownership and control, Adelzadeh observes, ecotourism becomes just another mechanism for “the extraction of revenue from communities.”<sup>22</sup> Avoiding this, she adds, “requires tribes to retain decision-making authority over their land and natural and cultural resources.”<sup>23</sup>

A third theme is the need to invest in leadership, which requires a multigenerational approach that cultivates the wisdom and sustained involvement of elders while also focusing on developing the next generation of leaders. Both Center Pole and NAEDC understand this and place youth development at the center of their work. Stewardship, Adelzadeh emphasizes, “has always been a community activity, with the transfer of knowledge from elders to youth.”<sup>24</sup>

**THE PATH FORWARD**

Adelzadeh concludes by noting that “tribes and Native-led organizations have demonstrated that they have the knowledge, commitment, and ingenuity to lead innovative and effective stewardship initiatives, but they lack adequate funding to fully realize the potential of these efforts.”<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the \$20 billion in the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) support for tribal nations can help boost these stewardship efforts.<sup>26</sup> A policy brief from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the Native Nations Institute, however, cautions that distribution of ARPA funds favored “have” tribes (those with large gambling revenues, for example) over “have not” or “have less” tribes.<sup>27</sup> All four tribal nations cited here are in the poorly resourced category. Even so, a small portion of the funding they did receive—which ranged from \$28.2 million for the Lower Brule Sioux to \$74.5 million for the Crow—could boost some local efforts.<sup>28</sup>

As is often the case, a redirection in approach—and not just resources—is required. Too often, Adelzadeh cautions, “Western pedagogies of stewardship, typically channeled through agencies and universities . . . laud individuals as experts and knowledge holders, while greatly downplaying the importance and traditional roles of communities.”<sup>29</sup> The solution, she contends, requires the opposite—namely, “active efforts rooted in local place-based knowledge” and Indigenous stewardship.<sup>30</sup>

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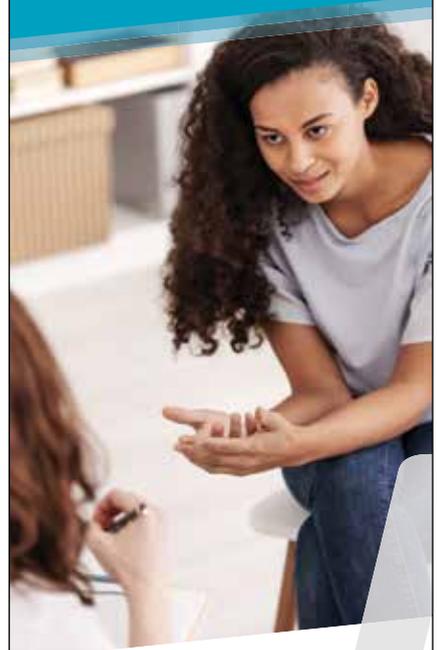
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**STEVE DUBB** is a senior editor at *NPQ*, where he directs *NPQ*'s economic justice program, including *NPQ*'s *Economy Remix* column. Dubb has worked with cooperatives and nonprofits for over two decades, including twelve years at The Democracy Collaborative and three years as executive director of NASCO (North American Students of Cooperation). In his work, he has authored, coauthored, and edited numerous reports; participated in and facilitated learning cohorts; designed community-building strategies; and helped advance the field of community wealth building. He is the lead author of *Building Wealth: The Asset-Based Approach to Solving Social and Economic Problems* (Aspen, 2005) and coauthor (with Rita Hodges) of *The Road Half Traveled: University Engagement at a Crossroads* (Michigan State University Press, 2012). In 2016, he curated and authored *Conversations on Community Wealth Building*, a collection of interviews of community builders conducted over the previous decade.

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# A Planet to Win— Where Do We Start?

by *Rithika Ramamurthy*

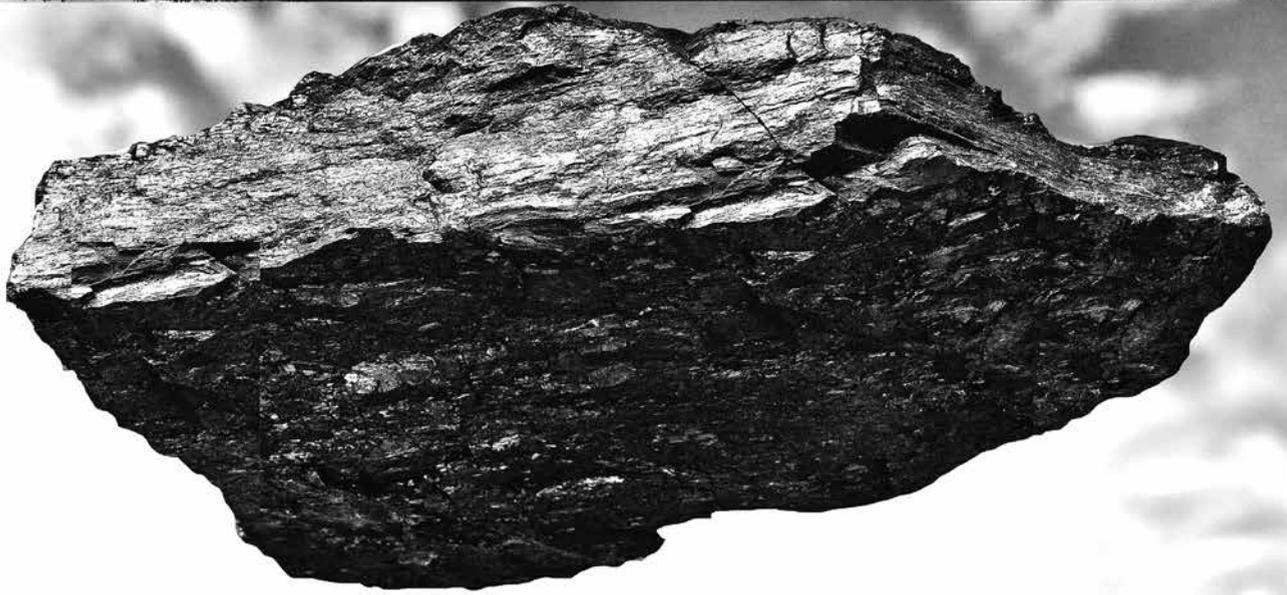
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“If we do not currently have a global proletariat ready to seize the means of ecological production, then we need a transition. And the first step to transition is for climate coalitions to ask: Where is power? Who has it? And how can we take it?”

—Thea Riofrancos

■ In the middle of a heat wave in Madrid this July, I climbed five flights of stairs in the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* to attend a conference on the climate movement, “A Planet to Win: Where Do We Start?”<sup>1</sup> The panel was held in a room at the top of the building, offering sweeping views of the sweltering city. Seventy-five people or so gathered to listen to the five panelists—a group of climate academics, activists, and journalists—answer the question that the summit’s title proposed.

But the question of “we” has always been a fraught one.<sup>2</sup> Governments, corporations, and individuals are not actors with equal amounts of influence. The fossil fuel industry alone is responsible for the majority of global carbon emissions in the past four decades.<sup>3</sup> Between 1990 and 2015—a “critical 25-year period of unprecedented emissions growth”—the wealthiest one percent of the planet emitted “more than twice as much . . . as the 3.1 billion people who made up the poorest half of humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Countries in the Global North are far more responsible for carbon pollution than countries in the Global South, which feel its effects the most.<sup>5</sup>



We scorch the earth, set fire to the sky. We stoop so low to reach so high.





The problem of where—or rather, how—to begin with climate change mitigation is essentially the focus of the most recent report in April from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which states plainly that humanity's ability to reverse

and reduce the effects of climate change depends almost entirely upon the political willpower of governments to implement coordinated and large-scale interventional strategies.<sup>6</sup> Yet social transformation on this scale has not historically happened without concerted struggle by ordinary people demanding what they need to survive.

Without economic transformation, just transitions, and green new deals, the world's population will unevenly experience the accelerating catastrophe of planetary death—and the conference began by endowing “us” with purpose to shift the multiple and uneven paradigms of climate inequality. Bringing together climate experts from the United States, Europe, and South America, it attempted to paint a picture of where the international ecosocialist climate movement—which seeks to confront the interrelated crises of capitalism and climate change through democratic transformations of the economy, the state, and social relations—stands today.

The event was convened by *Contra el diluvio*, an organization dedicated to revealing the consequences of climate change to the public. Based in Madrid and founded in 2017, its name echoes a line in Karl Marx's *Capital*, “Après moi, le deluge!”: “[After me, the flood!] is the motto of every capitalist and every capitalist nation. That is why capital does not take into consideration the health or the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so.”<sup>7</sup> Marx's phrase repeats a quip attributed to King Louis XV of France, giving voice to capitalism's nihilistic tendency to move society toward a crisis pitch with disregard for what disaster follows. To counter this indifference on behalf of the powerful, the organization took its name, which translates as “against the deluge,” or “against the flood.”

The group's goal has been to help introduce climate narratives and demands into social movement organizations in Madrid—from tenants' rights groups to racial justice organizations. Initially self-funded, the group has hosted debates, disseminated articles, translated climate policy, and publicized information about climate change in the service of socialized knowledge. “Only the collective and organized action of those below will allow us to survive the coming deluge,” the organizers write.<sup>8</sup>

It was in this imperative spirit that people gathered to hear what the panelists had to say about what is to be done. Kate Aronoff, journalist at the *New Republic* and coauthor of *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (2019), began with the American situation. She offered a succinct prehistory of the Green New Deal in the United States, tracing its emergence from a particular group of political movements rooted in critiques of inequality and principles of social justice that emerged in 2011, 2013, and 2016, respectively: Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and Standing Rock. The forces inherent in these overlapping movements—demands for economic, climate, and racial justice—pushed the liberal mainstream climate imaginary into more intersectional territory by, for example, linking carbon taxes to anti-corporate sentiment, or disinvestment in predominantly Black and Brown community infrastructure to green transportation demands. The Green New Deal framework has since been taken up by racial justice groups, such as the Movement for Black Lives—which has helped shape the aspirational horizon of its vision with calls for a Red, Black & Green New Deal,<sup>9</sup> adding calls for reparations to those for decarbonization—and the Red Nation's Red Deal, which pushes the Green New Deal further, as well as centers Indigenous people, history, and knowledge in the fight for climate justice.<sup>10</sup> In Aronoff's words, connecting climate justice to issues of racial and gender inequality reframes climate action as a question of democratic movements: “What is it a climate movement should be, and who should it be for?”

The climate movement resurfaced in mainstream political discussion eight years after that burst of uprisings, in 2016, when Senator Bernie Sanders's (D-VT) bid for the presidency reoriented the U.S. left to the possibilities of electoral

# “What is it a climate movement should be, and who should it be for?”

—Kate Aronoff

politics. The Democratic party began to champion climate legislation from within the Capitol; in 2018, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), backed by the energy of the youth-led activist group Sunrise Movement,<sup>11</sup> and together with Senator Ed Markey (D-MA), introduced the Green New Deal—legislation laying out a plan for the large-scale social and political action necessary to decrease corporate carbon emissions, reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and create jobs in clean energy industries.<sup>12</sup> The proposals were not necessarily new; the Green New Deal has been an embattled political talking point since at least the early 2000s,<sup>13</sup> claimed by major political parties and articulated within opinion columns.<sup>14</sup> But when Sunrise protestors, eventually joined by newly elected members of Congress, staged a sit-in outside of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office in November of that year, it became clear that the calls for climate policy action were coming from both inside *and* outside the House.<sup>15</sup>

The proof that this climate movement had real influence came in the run-up to the 2020 election, Aronoff explained, during which Democratic candidates were competing with each other over how many trillions they would spend to

mitigate the crisis, using the language of the Green New Deal put forward by climate activists. Every single candidate pledged “‘net-zero’ emissions by 2050 or earlier,” but most of these campaign-trail promises never materialized.<sup>16</sup> “We won part of the debate but none of the hegemony,” as Aronoff put it during the conference. The problem is, nothing short of hegemony will change the course of humanity. “We need a solution at the scale of the crisis,” she emphasized, “a massive reinvestment program to reframe climate politics from austerity, lifestyle changes, and market tweaks to a redistribution of resources.” These ideas are popular and achievable, but the U.S. political system is uniquely and perhaps strategically bad at translating massive public support into policy. “There is no path toward decarbonization that doesn’t run through democratic majorities—but the U.S. isn’t a democracy.”

“When someone tells you the apocalypse is coming,” Daniel Aldana Cohen said, following Aronoff’s remarks, “you should pay attention.” Cohen, assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, coauthor of *A Planet to Win*, and founding codirector of the progressive climate policy

**To build a transformative, democratic mass movement, labor, community groups, and Indigenous activist movements should be looking to each other to connect, Riofrancos argued, rather than carving out “who counts” in a climate movement. But coalition building is a balancing act. Movements need the time and space to explore and land on what is needed—and who needs it—as they form alliances.**

think tank Climate and Community Project, stressed the pragmatic tenor of climate demands today. “The Green New Deal,” he explained, “was a radical idea about public-led investment planning the coordination of tens of trillions of dollars to physically rebuild the world and reinvest in disinvested communities.” Today, as the IPCC report denotes, these radical ideas have become reasonable.

To this end, Cohen mentioned the importance of publicizing “climate justice you can touch,” real-world examples of efforts to realize this necessary vision and building of coalitions around concrete proposals, such as recent efforts in Rhode Island to build state-run public housing.<sup>17</sup> In a follow-up interview, I asked Cohen to elaborate on what it takes to synthesize a mass movement with concrete policy

demands. In his research on battles against green gentrification in São Paulo, Cohen said, he realized that housing movements were “low-carbon protagonists, since they are actually fighting for both density and affordability: affordable housing near jobs, transit, and services.” He continued, “Housing movements led by women of color all across the Americas have as good or better visions for the green city than most environmentalists.”<sup>18</sup> Bringing this principle back home, Cohen worked over the course of two years in the realms of fieldwork, journalism, and policy proposals to propose a Green New Deal for Housing.<sup>19</sup>

The important insight that emerged from this work was the necessity of democratic participation to building political power behind climate transformation. Cohen was invited by

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's allies to talk about his ideas to organizers in New York working on public housing, where he emphasized the improvements to quality of life that the Green New Deal could provide, such as better kitchens and improved health conditions. At every step of the way, speaking to residents in public housing shaped his research and proposals for public housing transformation. The proposal for a Green New Deal for Housing, initially started in New York, was further shaped by community input when Cohen brought it to the think tank he cofounded and directs, the Climate and Community Project.<sup>20</sup> Residents were invited to comment on and review proposals, shown illustrations of retrofits, and asked what they would want their apartments to look like. That proposal was eventually coopted by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), who proposed \$80 billion for public housing retrofits in the Biden administration's Build Back Better plan—which, according to Cohen, was less than what the coalition had asked for but much more than any politician had ever seriously proposed. And getting expansive funding commitments for public housing into the biggest social spending package proposed in decades is an organizing win.

Cohen said,

To me, the big lesson is this: When there are underlying material commonalities for social and climate justice, research and organizing can bring those to the fore in innovative, synthetic, holistic proposals. And when movements are strong, and their political allies are strong, this can translate into some of the most serious policy out there. We haven't figured out how to defeat the right. But we're building a progressive Green New Deal left like no one imagined. And it's all about the fusion of social movements, and their allies, across issue areas. If research and writing can help that process along a tiny bit, all the better. There really is a progressive climate politics under construction right now. If we can build it with working class tenant movements of color, we can sure as hell build it across the rest of society—in this country and around the world.<sup>21</sup>

Cohen and Aronoff's perspectives on climate politics counter the paralytic defeatism of the U.S. political machine with the optimistic energy of organizing climate coalitions. The problems of climate politics become more complicated, however, when they expand to the planetary scale. Thea Riofrancos, associate professor of political science at Providence

College and coauthor with Aronoff and Cohen of *A Planet to Win*, spoke about the challenges of producing green technologies for renewable energy sources that cross borders without reproducing the inequalities of fossil capitalism. Riofrancos's research focuses on lithium mining, a global supply chain operation present across locations in Spain, Portugal, Chile, the United States, and elsewhere, and serves as a good example of the sprawling nature of the extractive economy and the challenges of transforming it.

How can the principles of the Green New Deal be applied to these complex chains? Focusing on the built environment, engineering, and design can be the crux of an internationalist climate politics that brings together disparate interests across the globe. "Each car we get off of the road, the less minerals we have to pull out of the ground," said Riofrancos. "Chileans resisting lithium mining in their communities don't want mining to happen; how could that be aligned with people who need transit in the U.S.?" Her answer knit together the political interests of both groups: In a world with mass transit, there is less need for electric vehicles (EVs). In this way, she added, we can move away from the idea that there is a divide between local struggles for participatory rights and global struggle for control over resources.

Finding the connective tissue within political contradictions is key to building collectivities that can collaborate on an international ecosocialist strategy. "Contradictions, dilemmas, and trade-offs all inhere in a transition," Riofrancos explained. Is there a possibility for ecosocialist revolution at a global scale? If we do not currently have a global proletariat ready to seize the means of ecological production, then we need a transition. And the first step to transition is for climate coalitions to ask: Where is power? Who has it? And how can we take it? Sitting and waiting for this revolution is not an option; instead, we need both disruptive organizing from communities and bold proposals from policy-makers. To build a transformative, democratic mass movement, labor, community groups, and Indigenous activist movements should be looking to each other to connect, Riofrancos argued, rather than carving out "who counts" in a climate movement. But coalition building is a balancing act. Movements need the time and space to explore and land on what is needed—and who needs it—as they form alliances; and groups that have historically been born out of and/or promulgated unjust practices in the name of "environmentalism" must evolve if they wish to genuinely partner

with movements that have formed precisely because they weren't allowed a seat at the table.

Locating power in order to democratize it among large-scale majorities is also the goal of the decolonization movement, which overlaps with the demands of a socialist climate movement—especially in Latin America—in complex and productive ways. Sabrina Fernandes, sociologist and Brazilian ecosocialist organizer, put this succinctly: “You can't become an independent nation without dealing with extractivism. Energy sovereignty is a question of who owns the territory, and what is done with it.” But this minimum requirement can also be an important galvanizing tool, Fernandes explained. Large-scale destruction of the Amazon has reached a record high under Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's tenure, associating him with destruction of the planet. Anyone opposing him politically must thus articulate an anti-extraction stance, which is not a difficult standard to meet. But the task of movements for social justice is not to let the bare minimum be the standard; there is also the hard work of making sure that progressive governments do not give up on the more radical and difficult demands that bring them to power.

Powerful coalitions between community groups and labor unions in South America are able to do just that by bringing principles of bargaining for the common good to the climate struggle. Fernandes explained to me that with these coalitions, advocating for environmentalism becomes less of a dangerous job: “Latin America is a very dangerous place to be an environmentalist—it's where an environmentalist is at one of the highest risks of assassination in the world.”<sup>22</sup> And for Indigenous leaders and defenders of Indigenous communities, it is even worse. “Indigenous communities have been the guardians of our ecosystems long before the modern environmental movement came to be,” Fernandes elaborated. “Indigenous genocide and ethnocide are at the core of practices that shape today's ecological crisis. Working together with Indigenous groups in their struggle for territory and recognition is not only our responsibility in terms of human rights but also helps to advance the cause for climate justice by protecting peoples and territories from capital.”<sup>23</sup>

On-the-ground resistance by Indigenous associations in Brazil to legal usurpation of their land is one way of connecting decolonization efforts to climate ecosocialism. One such appropriation measure, the “Marco Temporal,” or “Milestone Thesis”—championed by large landowners, agribusiness, and mining companies—would eliminate territorial

claims by Indigenous groups who cannot “prove” they were occupying that territory at the signing of Brazil's new constitution in 1988. This legal loophole would effectively use the centuries of genocidal displacement of Indigenous communities to rob them of both sovereignty and participatory control—which has obvious damaging consequences, including ecological ones.<sup>24</sup>

Settling issues around territorial rights with ecosocialist support is a productive pathway to building coalitions that bring genuine democracy back into the picture. Without fully autonomous Indigenous communities, there is no future for ecosocialism.

With escalating crises—hunger, fascism, weather—come increased possibilities for overlap between the ecosocialist movement and others. But how do we build consensus around changes? Like Cohen, Fernandes championed the idea that for a climate transition to work, it has to be a building block for something else. A “socialism of convenience” or “low-carbon luxury” are simple ways to communicate that a just transition includes people becoming happier, having more free time, and having basic needs met. Shortening the work week, redistributing care, building mass transit, and greening housing are all efforts to make life easier for people, and that's how the story of climate transition should be told. By centering the subject at the margins of every context, “the person living under constant vulnerability,” Fernandes said, we can lead ourselves to a climate politics that takes overlapping struggles into account.

Progress toward these goals is not linear. Hector Tejero, environmentalist and politician with the progressive party Más Madrid, spoke plainly about failure. In our historical context, Tejero explained, the Green New Deal is “destined to fail” based simply on the political setbacks it encountered in the past two decades—whether opposition from conservatives in the U.S. context or the cooptation by centrists in the European one. Add to that multiple levels of complication—pandemics, wars, economic crises—and it becomes impossible to imagine a straight line between our present state of inaction and a future state of ecosocialist abundance.

Thinking about failure as inherent in a movement is not a strategy of pessimistic realism. According to Tejero, it is the key to demanding more than we expect to achieve, knowing that we will achieve less than we need. Echoing a quote attributed to the Irish writer Samuel Beckett, Tejero said, “The

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—Sabrina Fernandes

consequences of climate change are going to be so bad that we have to ‘try again, fail again, fail better.’”<sup>25</sup> The way to begin trying is from the point that the climate crisis can always be made “less worse,” Tejero summed up, by both mitigation and adaptation: “We can always make the world a little bit less hot and a little bit more fair, and I think that’s a hopeful idea we must push in times of despair.” He pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of fear and uncertainty, flagging political resolve, and increased attenuation to suffering. This is true of the climate crisis, too.

In conversation with one another, the panelists turned to the topics of debt cancellation, inflation reduction, reparations, anti-gentrification, and demilitarization as pathways to climate politics. The wide-ranging nature of these struggles shows that there are multiple avenues toward the struggle for ecological justice, and they are not always obviously

connected or socially adjacent. It is the hard work of journalists, academics, organizers, activists, and policymakers to bridge those gaps between social movements, so that others worldwide can demand the possible.

“To be truly radical,” wrote the English Marxist Raymond Williams, “is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.”<sup>26</sup> This, according to Tejero and all the other panelists at “A Planet to Win,” is the main task of the climate movement today. After the talks, organizers from *Contra el diluvio* handed out posters depicting public luxury in social realist style. The heat had not diminished much, even at the hour of seven in the evening, as the sun had not yet set. Just a week later, Portugal was ablaze with wildfires that killed dozens and set thousands of acres of vineyards aflame. It can always be less worse. We should begin to make it so now.

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**RITHIKA RAMAMURTHY** is the *Nonprofit Quarterly's* economic justice editor. She lives and writes in Providence, Rhode Island, where she is finishing her dissertation on representations of work in nineteenth-century novels. She is the first elected president of the graduate student union at Brown (GLO-AFT Local 6516) and a founding member of Reclaim RI, a grassroots organization dedicated to building people power in the Ocean State. Her writing can be found in *Teen Vogue*, *Lux Magazine*, *The Drift*, *The Baffler*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *The Forge: Organizing Strategy and Practice*, among other publications.

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