

**College of Liberal Arts  
A Diversity Module on  
Indigenous Environmental Justice**

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## **A Brief Introduction to Indigenous Environmental Justice**

We find ourselves at a moment in time, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the issues of climate justice have become very pronounced. With record high temperatures across the globe, particularly over the last four years, no one can afford to ignore the changing environs in which we live. However, a large segment of those who work on environmental justice never consider what can be learned to save all of our futures by drawing upon the extensive knowledges (intentionally plural) of Indigenous peoples. As long time environmental scholar and activist Winona LaDuke has argued, “The last 150 years have seen a great holocaust. There have been more species lost in the past 150 years than since the Ice Age. During the same time, Indigenous peoples have been disappearing from the face of the earth. Over 2,000 nations of Indigenous peoples have gone extinct in the western hemisphere, and one nation disappears from the Amazon rainforest every year. There is a direct relationship between the loss of cultural diversity and the loss of biodiversity” (*All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* 1). This module illustrates how Indigenous peoples understand healthy human life as inseparable, or co-constitutive, with all other forms of life—plant life, water life, soil life, animal life, etc. In fact, most Indigenous peoples articulate their ancestral lands and territories as relatives—family members that should be cared for and stewarded, rather than exploited.

One prominent Indigenous model for environmental justice centers care for Mother Earth on a seven generations principle. This principle is actually quite practical, and can be used across disciplines, but it should not be deployed as a conduit to romanticize Indigenous peoples or cultures. The practicality of this principle is found with Indigenous peoples that are mindful of taking care of the three generations of people that came before them and the three generations that come after them. This care includes the transmission of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)—the diverse forms of knowledge held by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years based on their relationships with the land. TEK is constantly being transmitted in Indigenous communities, illustrates Indigenous peoples investment in what the Western world refers to as science, and it is evolving, rather than stagnant or fixed. TEK also shows that human life will only be healthy if in fact the land, water, and air are healthy.

Based on these principles and forms of knowledge, Indigenous peoples are positioned to be leaders in environmental justice. However, due to the abusive structure of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples have been treated as a group to be disposed of in order to turn the land and its natural resources into commodities for profit. Part of these abuses are evidenced by the maltreatment of Indigenous lands including instances such as: using sacred sites and reservations for the nation’s nuclear waste dump sites, clearcuts, and oil pipelines that inevitably spill. As a result of these realities, Indigenous environmental justice develops an ethical paradigm out of first-hand experience with eco-devastation. The attempts by Indigenous communities to save the entire biosphere from destruction include regional, national, and global efforts and this module will illustrate some of those examples.

Finally, Indigenous environmental justice ensures that mainstream environmental justice does not divorce the realities of racism and sexism from the work to protect all ecosystems. This is very important because many environmental groups have taken this divorced trajectory and effectively carried out environmental racism or what is often referred to as “green racism” in the name of saving the planet. For example, many communities of color face disproportionately high rates of pollutions in their local environments (ex: lead poisoned water in Flint, MI or highly polluted air from oil refineries in Richmond, CA). Simultaneously, some environmental groups,

such as the Sierra Club, have engaged in preservation campaigns against people of color arguing that immigrants create pollution or that pristine natural landscapes should be closed off to everyone (even when those landscapes are sacred sites to Indigenous peoples). Thus, Indigenous environmental justice is a more comprehensive, historically rooted practice to change the course of our current climate and return the health of all living entities.

### **Outline for Teaching Indigenous Environmental Justice**

1. Settler colonialism is the originating structure that commences environmental degradation.
  - a. What is settler colonialism? (See Itsuji Saranillio reading)
    - i. “Settler colonialism describes a historically created system of power that aims to expropriate Indigenous territories and eliminate modes of production in order to replace Indigenous peoples with settlers who are discursively constituted as superior and thus more deserving over these contested lands and resources.” (Dean Itsuji Saranillio, “Settler Colonialism”)
    - ii. Settler colonialism “destroys to replace.”
    - iii. Settler colonialism normalizes occupation of Indigenous territories
  - b. Settler colonialism is never a finished project due to the settler insatiable thirst for land.
  - c. Settler colonialism is a structure not an event. (See Patrick Wolfe reading)
  - d. Settler colonialism introduces the economic system of capitalism creating a competition for natural resources such as oil, coal, uranium, and water. (See Donald Fixico reading)
2. Indigenous land stewardship is based on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).
  - a. What is TEK?
    - i. TEK is the diverse forms of knowledge held by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years based on their relationships with the land.
    - ii. These knowledges are plural because Indigenous peoples are very diverse and because the landscapes are diverse.
    - iii. TEK is used to steward all non-human relatives (land, water, plants, animals), and is constantly evolving with local specificities.
    - iv. TEK does not exist without Indigenous peoples.
  - b. The values of capitalism, in the U.S. or elsewhere, stand in stark contrast to the values of Indigenous peoples around natural resources and ecosystems.
    - i. TEK drives land-based practices for Indigenous communities.
    - ii. Profit drives land-based practices for settlers.
3. Seven Generations Principle for environmental justice.
  - a. What is a Seven Generations Principle?
    - i. Indigenous value of considering the three previous generations and the three following generations of people when making decisions about the environment.
    - ii. A principle that can help decenter greed and devastation as related to the land.
  - b. Seven Generations Principle should be carried out with Indigenous people at the decision-making table, rather than culturally appropriating it.
4. Indigenous environmental justice helps alleviate environmental racism.
  - a. What is environmental racism?
    - i. Environmental racism attempts to carry out environmentalism at the expense of people of color.

- ii. Examples of environmental racism include disproportionate pollution in communities of color such as lead poisoned water in Flint, MI or highly polluted air in oil refinery cities such as Richmond, CA.
  - iii. Indigenous peoples specifically have worked to challenge environmental racism with examples such as: Northwest coastal peoples saving their salmon relatives from water pollution, White Earth people in Minnesota restoring their forests that were clearcut and recovering their forest cultures and foods like wild rice, and the Standing Rock Sioux resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline in an attempt to save the Missouri River from pollution.
  - b. Indigenous environmental justice is a much more holistic plan to end environmental destruction *and* end environmental racism.
5. Decolonizing Environmental Justice
- a. Indigenous peoples are already leading the way to halt climate change and restore important ecosystems.
    - i. Resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline
    - ii. Resistance to Keystone XL Pipeline
  - b. Indigenous peoples maintain healthier landscapes (forests, grasslands, waterways, etc.)
  - c. Indigenous peoples live *with* the land not *over* the land (See Navarro reading)

### **Annotated Bibliography for Instructors**

Itsuji Saranillio, Dean. "Settler Colonialism." *Native Studies Keywords*, edited by Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith and Michelle H. Raheja. University of Arizona Press, 2015, pp. 284-300.

This article introduces the reader to settler colonialism and is helpful for those both familiar with the historical realities of settler colonialism and those who are not as familiar. Itsuji Saranillio shows how settler colonialism is distinct from other forms of colonialism because it is a long-term structure of "replacing one landscape for another, one people for another, one mode of production for another" all the while "normalizing occupation" of Indigenous homelands (284). Importantly, to understand the origins of environmental degradation one must fully grasp the continual project of settler colonialism and this article provides a framework for this understanding. Specifically, Itsuji Saranillio argues that the "recurrent processes of settler accumulation" only happens by Native dispossession of land and life, which is all organized through an imbalance of power relations (284).

Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and The Elimination of The Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2006, vol. 8 no. 4, pp. 387-409.

This article builds a foundational knowledge about settler colonialism and how it is inextricably tied to land. Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is a genocidal project since "land is life"—thus, "contests for land can be—indeed, often are—contests for life" (387). Additionally, this article is extremely significant to Native Studies, and by extension to this investigation of Indigenous environmental justice, because Wolfe contends that settler colonialism relies upon the "logic of elimination," where settlers pursue the "summary liquidation of Indigenous peoples" in order to expropriate lands (388). This violent practice is also indicated by the fact that "settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" (388). With the understanding that settler colonialism is an ongoing structure—one that is also highly attached to capitalism—it becomes much clearer to ascertain why and how our natural environments have continuously declined in health over the last 500 years.

Fixico, Donald L. *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources*, Second Edition. University Press of Colorado, 2012.

The book is an excellent account of the opposing values about land ethics between Indigenous and white communities. Fixico highlights many examples of ecological detriment carried out by capitalists against the will of Indigenous peoples regarding ancestral lands. For instance, he looks closely at Pueblo water rights in the Southwest region of the U.S. and Chippewa fishing and hunting rights in the Great Lakes. He also shows how the court has been operationalized for centuries as a colonial legislature against Indigenous peoples and the land. And, he details how issues like land allotment or tribal termination can lead directly to environmental injustice as well. Finally, he provides some insights into "defense strategies" where Indigenous peoples are fighting hard to heal the Earth now in the twenty-first century.

LaDuke, Winona. *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*. Haymarket, 1999.

Winona LaDuke is one of the most renowned, life-long Native environmental scholars and activists in the world. This book focuses on the many forms of toxic invasion into Native America and how Indigenous communities have been activating their local populations to fight these injustices for a very long time. She looks at many examples of toxic invasion including attacks on land, water, and animal relatives. Then, she offers many suggestions for alternative routes to save all these relatives and restore the health of biodiversity *and* cultural diversity—since, as she argues, the two are closely related. She also provides many of her own experiences working with Indigenous communities on alternative energy as the path to everyone's future. Finally, the last chapter of the book turns to the Seventh Generation principle to reconfigure the ways in which settler laws and practices have exploited the natural world in hopes of reinstating health to all forms of life—human and non-human. She shows how this reconfiguration would also entail a rethinking of the current U.S. constitution.

Weaver, Jace (ed.). *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice*. Orbis Books, 1996.

This book is a collection of 11 essays by Native environmental activists. Since so many of the people and organizations that are well-known in the mainstream on environmental activism are non-Native, this collection provides an opportunity to understand environmental justice from Native peoples with firsthand experience of Indigenous homelands being destroyed. The chapters are also fairly contained and teachable one at a time. The various essays show the longstanding fight for healthy ecosystems across the Americas with some chapters focusing more on historical issues and others on evolving contemporary issues. Also, most chapters can be utilized as case studies on environmental degradation and others can be helpful in understanding the importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (Chapter 9), the dangers of the deploying 'population control' as environmentalism (Chapter 8), or simply the movement perspective provided in the "Forward" by Russell Means—co-founder of the American Indian Movement.

Navarro, Jenell. "Solarize—ing Native Hip-Hop: Native Feminist Land Ethics and Cultural Resistance." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 101-118.

This article utilizes Native hip-hop as a conduit to advocate for land ethics from a Native feminist analytic. Namely, Navarro argues that people should turn away from a settler colonial and capitalist framework of land ethics that have been largely patriarchal and abusive—since those frameworks have extended abuse of the land to abuse of the Native body (especially Native women's and two-spirit bodies). Native feminist land ethics would live *with* the land rather than *over* the land, which would not rely so heavily on settler governments to 'do the right thing' and take care of the land since they are the ones that profit from environmental destruction. Instead, Native feminist ethics operate on a community and grassroots level and can even be taught to younger generations through accessible mediums such as hip-hop.



### **Annotated Bibliography for Students**

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LaDuke, Winona. *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*. Haymarket, 1999.

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Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2014.

This book is an historical and present overview of what it means to be Indigenous in the United States. Dunbar-Ortiz shows how the last five hundred years of U.S. history have been a campaign of Indigenous elimination strategically designed to seize the territories of the first inhabitants of these lands. Specifically, chapter one titled "This Land" would be an excellent resource for students on this module to have a contextual understanding about the U.S. In "This Land" Dunbar-Ortiz argues, "Everything in US history is about the land—who oversaw and cultivated it, fished its waters, maintained its wildlife; who invaded and stole it; how it became a commodity ("real estate") broken into pieces to be bought and sold on the market" (1). Thus, in order to understand how to care for the land, and other living entities, one must know the historical realities that have led up to our current moment and this chapter/book would give that type of foundational knowledge to its readers.

### Suggested Classroom Activities

#### Visual Art Analysis:

Carefully view the painting below by Christ Belcourt, a Métis artist with a deep respect for Mother Earth. This painting is full of life and detail so spend a good amount of time looking at it thoroughly. Take some notes on exactly what you see and take some separate notes on questions you might have about the painting. Also, read the short artist's statement about the painting that is attached.

*Our Lives are in the Land*

2014

48" x 60", Acrylic on Canvas



#### Artist's Statement:

"The plants are teachers. They are connected to each other, and all other spiritual beings through the sacredness of life. When I remember who I am—a human being connected to all of life—I remember also that I am loved by the spirit world and our ancestors. And when I remember this, I remember to respect even the smallest of things."

After you have looked carefully at this painting *and* read some of the required readings on settler colonialism and Indigenous perspectives about environmental justice, discuss the following questions in small groups:

Discussion Questions:

1. How does this painting display a deep respect for the land and all non-human living things?
2. How is this view of the land distinct from a mainstream view of the land that often sees the land as just another resource for profit?
3. How and why might Belcourt's vision be a more compelling one for all of our futures to be healthier and environmentally just?
4. Which portions of the painting display what Winona LaDuke has argued about the inseparable connections between biodiversity and cultural diversity?

Share your responses with the whole class, ask any questions for clarification about the painting and its details, and take note of the aspects that other groups highlighted that your group did not.

The painting can also be found online at:

<http://christibelcourt.com/ancestry/>

### **Module Activities Continued**

#### Hip-Hop Video Analysis:

In 2016 a number of Indigenous youth and Indigenous women started a global movement to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline that was slated to be routed through traditional and treaty-guaranteed Great Sioux Nation territory. The 1,200-mile pipeline was blueprinted to pass through the ground above the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and it would pass the Missouri River twice and the Mississippi River once creating toxic water for millions of people downstream as well. Those who gathered at the Sacred Stones Camp, Red Warrior Camp, and the Oceti Sakowin Camp resisted the building of this pipeline.

Many Indigenous peoples disseminated their perspectives on being Water Protectors at Standing Rock. One such display can be seen with Prolific the Rapper's song and video titled "Black Snakes."

View the video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdeHUrL1FEM>

After watching this video and reading Winona LaDuke's book *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, discuss the following questions:

1. Drawing from the Indigenous seven generation model how might hip-hop be a tool utilized for productive resistance?
2. How can hip-hop translate a message of water protection or land ethics to a younger generation in effective ways?
3. Why might filmmaking or the visual storytelling of this film and music video be a tool for *normalizing resistance*?
4. In which portions of the song can you see Prolific's view on Mother Earth (both in visual terms and in the lyrics) as distinct from non-Native readings of environmental justice?

Finally, discuss as a class how important it is to you to think and strategize beyond the limits of the law or the state to adequately redeliver health to all natural environments and divest from fossil fuels.

1. How can we respond to state violence and militarized police when trying to protect the Earth?
2. How can we use non-violent direct action to get the police to reflect upon their stance? (Example: This video layers in the live call to the police dispatcher to ask who will protect the unarmed people at Standing Rock from the militarized police. Additionally, at Standing Rock artists came together and made mirror shields that they sent to the Water Protectors. These were shields designed with a large mirror on the front held up by Water Protectors when they were face-to-face with a police line-up so the police could see themselves and their own unnecessary violence.)

## **Media Resources**

### Websites:

<http://www.honorearth.org>  
<http://www.ienearth.org>  
<http://www.nodaplarchive.com>  
<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>  
<http://nmai.si.edu/environment/>  
<https://libguides.asu.edu/c.php?g=263762&p=1765011>  
<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-tribes-and-indigenous-peoples>

### YouTube Videos:

Winona LaDuke's Ted Talk on Food Sovereignty as Environmental Justice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHNlel72eQc>

Tom Goldtooth on Indigenous Environmental Justice:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FPrJ7W-O\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FPrJ7W-O_o)

“What is Indigenous Environmental Justice?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2SrQZXE8hQ>

Prolific the Rapper's “Black Snakes”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdeHUrL1FEM>

Desirae Harp, Fly 50, and SeasunZ's “Solarize”:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIHHMN\\_9HsY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIHHMN_9HsY)

### Vimeo Video:

“Mother of All Rivers”

<https://vimeo.com/119605012>

### Films:

*Awake, A Dream from Standing Rock* (2017)

*Water Warriors* (2017)

*Beyond Recognition* (2015)

*Drumbeat for Mother Earth* (2000)

*Islands of Sanctuary* (2014)

*Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth* (2011)



### **Tips and Pitfalls**

1. Oftentimes when the natural world is discussed in conjunction with Indigenous peoples there is an essentializing assumption that Indigenous peoples are ‘one with nature.’ This romanticizes Indigenous peoples and cultures in a mythological manner and is untrue. Please be mindful of this common practice when teaching this module and, instead, simply assert that Indigenous peoples are land-based communities, which means Indigenous origin stories, sacred sites, and worldviews are tied to the land.
2. Terra nullius: The Latin phrase *terra nullius*, meaning “empty land” or “no one’s land” has often been used as a justification for settler colonialism and turning land into property. Please be mindful that simply because land was not “owned” does not mean it was unkept or unoccupied. In fact, the deployment of *terra nullius* is ahistorical and operates to further erase the presence of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands.
3. Environmental Racism or Green Racism: Many environmentalists create hierarchies of “justice” in their attempts to save the planet. In many instances, people of color are further marginalized by environmental groups that do not take an intersectional approach in their work. For example, groups like the Sierra Club have supported anti-immigrant legislation because they argue that immigrants are causing pollution. However, they do this without conclusive evidence of such arguments. In fact, immigrants in the U.S. typically do not take up as much living space, are more likely to carpool or use public transportation, and are less likely to waste important resources like water and food. Other examples of environmental racism are when environmentalists argue that Indigenous peoples should not be allowed to maintain their ceremonial activities at sacred sites that are considered too pristine for any population to occupy. State and federal land agencies often play a role in these forms of racism as well when they purport to know more about land management than the traditional peoples of a given territory and, therefore, are not willing to consult with local tribes. Thus, it is important to be mindful of the ways in which people of color are too often seen as expendable in the name of the environmentalism.
4. The language of overpopulation: The language of overpopulation is usually in tandem with anti-immigrant sentiments and a politics of fear. Yet, it is time and again the rhetoric deployed by many environmentalists. Instead of advocating for sharing resources and wealth, some will argue that certain populations need to stop having children. This has had dire consequences to populations of color in the U.S. For example, even in the 1960s and 1970s the U.S. government forcefully sterilized thousands of Black, Indigenous, Chicana, and Puerto Rican women based on these racist logics of overpopulation (see works by authors such as Dorothy Roberts and Myla Carpio to learn more).
5. Natural Resources: The use of the term ‘natural resources’ is okay to use, but needs to be deployed with some care and qualifiers. Many Indigenous peoples do not talk about the land in terms of resources because that is language created by a capitalist system that exploits such demarcated “resources.” The language of “resources” also does not imply a

reciprocal relation between the land and the people—rather, it implies a unidirectional trajectory for those “resources” to be taken in the name of “progress.” Furthermore, many Indigenous languages describe the land as a relative/family member, which also stands in stark contrast to the colonizing nomenclature of “resources”—especially, since closely behind the terminology of “resources” follows extraction and exploitation for profit.