

# Racial Ecologies

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**“WE ARE THE LAND, AND THE LAND IS US”**

*Indigenous Land, Lives, and Embodied  
Ecologies in the Twenty-First Century*

DIAN MILLION

On April 1st, 2016, tribal citizens of the Standing Rock Lakota Nation and ally Lakota, Nakota, & Dakota citizens, under the group name “Chante tin’sa kINANZI Po,” founded a Spirit Camp along the proposed route of the bakken oil pipeline, Dakota Access. The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), owned by Energy Transfer Partners, L.P., is proposed to transport 450,000 barrels per day of bakken crude oil (which is fracked and highly volatile) from the lands of North Dakota to Patoka, Illinois.

STATEMENT, CAMP OF THE SACRED STONES, 2016

The death of a traditional food system is the death of a nation . . . physically and culturally. We can and must protect and restore practices that can make us healthy and well as indigenous people.

SECOND GLOBAL CONSULTATION ON THE RIGHT TO  
FOOD AND FOOD SECURITY FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES,  
NICARAGUA, SEPTEMBER 7–9, 2006

i loved the fish  
and now the fish are scarce here  
i think i must believe it will better further north  
at home whatever place you cannot bear to see stripped not  
always somewhere else  
what is left is sacred no reason is enough  
no one can tell me this will not be about the water my

frantic love  
laughs out loud  
tells them not to spray paint their lawns green

DIAN MILLION

**T**HE Standing Rock Lakota's 2016 effort to protect the Mni Sose, the Missouri River, from the Dakota Access Pipeline rallied Indigenous peoples and myriad ecological warriors of different stripes worldwide. In many ways, Standing Rock presents us with a heretofore unimagined assemblage in solidarity to protect water, the source of life on this planet. The Lakota people led with a powerful prayer of hope. As the winter of 2016 set in with unprecedented blizzard conditions, Donald Trump, a New York real estate baron, was elected president of the United States, and Energy Transfer Partners, the Dakota Access pipeline's corporate sponsors, prevailed. The subsequent drilling beneath the Missouri River (at Lake Oahe) was an act of rape, a violence that ignored Standing Rock's long-embodied sovereignty in that Lakota place. The amount of militarized police mobilized against the allied Lakota Water Protectors to "finish the job" testifies loudly to the ongoing matrix of uneven power relations between the United States and the Lakota. These are relations that Standing Rock has negotiated and struggled with for over a century.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in late December 2017, the United States is again poised to invade an Indigenous place, Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit (the sacred place where life begins), as it is known in Gwich'in Athabaskan, and in English as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The porcupine caribou calving grounds that have sustained a way of life for millennia are about to go under the knife, casually sacrificed as an add-on to a tax bill that few have read. Again, this move is about oil, and need, and places that are not imaginable to most of the citizens of the United States (and Canada).

Any appeal in this moment to liberal "human" rights for the Indigenous can never bring the entirety of the Gwich'in or Standing Rock people's full relations to entities like rivers, air, land, and other beings into its logic. A just inclusion of the nonhuman in this place already exists under Lakota law that far exceeds any "rights"-based appeal for states to be better actors. Thus, at Standing Rock, the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota obeyed their own sacred law, their ages-old responsibilities that they do not shirk. These Indigenous

laws are often in direct opposition to national and international laws, whose primary responsibility is to protect the "property" of global enterprise and a settler imperative of emptying sacred places of Indigenous relations. This is settler colonialism as it is lived in our Indigenous places now, in this moment. The stepped-up intensity of our Indigenous-led resistance movements—Standing Rock, Idle No More in Canada, and the Gwich'in's defense of Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit—should be understood as decision points, moments when we, as inhabitants, victims, and recipients of benefits wrought by the destruction of our own conditions for life on this planet, might do something different. It is critical that we imagine a future for more than "just us."

In this chapter, I join in conversation with others who foreground our lives lived, in different locations, ones that come from our racialized, gendered, and class experiences of ecological life and death in the presence of globalized capital. I seek first to acknowledge our relations as we come together, in this collection, rather than to just identify differences. At the same time, I believe that there is great worth in learning from the interstices, rivulets, and streams that represent meetings and differences that our peoples' histories and different economic, political, and cultural positions give us. The Indigenous peoples of this continent hold up a difference that is not fully captured by the matrix of race and "ecology." I enter the conversation titled "Racial Ecologies" by problematizing its terms. This chapter seeks to present Indigenous experience in its ability to complicate what we imagine as "justice" if we cannot imagine our relations. I first examine the myth of our Indigenous absence but racialized presence in the heart of capitalism. I then turn to the land, to argue for what Indigenism means where it can be read, not through any pristine or primordial lens, but in its worth as a different matrix of values. I do so that we might ask harder questions about what "ecology" is to any equitable, safe, or healthy lives we might desire. I end with a discussion of the relations of Indigenous survivance and presence in an Arctic "last frontier." Imagined as a great empty space, the Arctic is actually the site of one of the oldest ongoing struggles in North America.

#### HUBS

One increasingly antithetical split created in our minds is that there is an "urban" and a "rural." What exactly do these terms mean? In the 2016 US presidential election, that split was imagined by one political party as a racial and class divide, between "multicultural" and "educated" white urban

dwellers and poor rural uneducated “whites.” We should be suspicious of this oversimplification.

In the configurations of race, class, and gender that map the megacities that now cover huge swaths of the United States, Indigenous peoples are disappeared. In the statistics that account for the racial and economic fabric of the United States, the racialization of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples disappears them. These cities rose in the ashes of Indigenous places and gained their prosperity from capitalizing on the same abundance that nourished our economies for thousands of years. These megacities, the “urban,” now serve as hubs for a capitalism that operates transnationally and globally. These are places that are served up as imaginary nodes of progress, cited as epitomes of “freedom” for a mobile “creative” class.

In 2002, Richard Florida, the economist author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, graphically illustrated five major cities, with their “creative” classes surrounded by poorer, suburban “service” classes, and with small pockets of “working class” residents in their peripheries. These “class” geographies reflect the intensity of financial centers, surrounded by those there to service them while being pushed to the periphery, unable to live in the intensified gentrification created by housing-market values and shifting racial codes.<sup>2</sup> This core embedded in these inner cities represent “creative class” jobs and housing that are 73.8 percent white.<sup>3</sup> The racial and multicultural are mostly accounted for in “service class” jobs, which they are often pushed into once white suburbs are transformed by immigration, while any “working class” thins.

In the United States and Canada, capitalist interests have sought to represent their labor policies as benign among peoples pushed into diaspora. Capitalism in North America presents in the establishment of *multicultural* democracies that have promised equity, progress, and opportunity for all. This benign reading of capitalism has become eclipsed in the twenty-first century as the facts of capital’s voracious needs and the violence of resource wars have now pushed myriad peoples into the realities of established settler-colonial xenophobia.

The Indigenous peoples of the North American continent are not represented in these megacities (even when they are greatly present) because they are associated with another narrative, that of “frontiers” and of a past rather than a future. Indigenous peoples, characterized as the primitive past, anchor the narratives of progress that built these megacities on their lands, cities that disappear their difference within the hierarchies that keep our capitalist relations in place. Indigenous peoples are very present in these cities and the environments that they are also a part of. A US Census report

states that “in 2010, the majority of the American Indian and Alaska Native alone-or-in-combination population (78 percent) lived outside of American Indian and Alaska Native areas.” In this same report much is made of race: “Nearly half of the American Indian and Alaska Native population reported multiple races.”<sup>4</sup> The US Census produces a “rationalized” statement of the nation-state’s biopolitical interest in the management of its “populations.” In the above assessment, the United States declares that the population deemed “American Indian and Alaskan Native” statistically exceeds a state expectation of its place and composition. It is a “population” that exceeds the boundaries of its colonization and its racialization. When the myriad peoples of Turtle Island were colonized, they were rationalized, singularly reduced to a race, “Indian,” putting a numerical quantity on their bountiful multiplicity.

The implication of this constant numerical assessment of the assimilation of Indigenous peoples reveals an ardent hope. The nation-state (the United States, in this case) dutifully accounts for the moment when such people are no longer numerically significant; until the moment when no “pure” population defined by the original “contracts” of their status exists. At that time, “Indians” pass into the general population with “other” mixed, minoritized, and racialized populations without claims to treaties and sovereignties. In the face of this rational epistemology, those who attempt to live on as Indigenous often report the affective weight of being an ontological and moral challenge to the dominant order. In this setting, the relations that inform the fight for the Mni Sose at Standing Rock and for the Arctic seem absent, or unrecognizable. In urban settings Indigenous peoples suffer from the same kinds of “environmental” disasters that have become familiar to many. We suffer from the failure of systems that serve capital but not people who are insignificant to it, from the fate of those whose labor is not needed, or who are no longer legible—the homeless, the addicted, and the old. These great hubs of capitalist life have relations and a “lifestyle” that is now so ascendant that we might mistake it as a natural force. Yet, these lives we live, however nourished or abandoned by capitalist infrastructure, are actually lives with profound relations.

What are these relations? How do they make us? Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellow Knives Dine) reminds of these relations in his *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* in his Indigenous reading of Marx: “[A] mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express

their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce [it].<sup>5</sup>

The modes of life that capitalism produces are profoundly anchored by hierarchies of race, class, and gender. They present as places of great excitement, great extremes of income and consumption, and the capitalist *vie joyeuse* for some. Yet, these are increasingly “urban,” cities within cities that are themselves only nodes in great streams of capitalist activity that stretch across our worlds. As sociologist and geographer Deborah Cowen points out, our cities are now shaped by their roles in the three great flows of capital: production, consumption, and distribution.<sup>6</sup> The wars that nations like the United States now fight are primarily those in protection of these flows, those of data, of goods or energy. The outsized presence of a state and corporatized (and militarized) police force in protection of the Black Snake at Mni Sose, the Missouri River, makes more sense when you understand the needs of global capital to protect these infrastructures, these flows, capitalism’s bloodstreams.

These homes and hubs of capital are always undergoing renovation, reorganized for the goods and labors that are capitalism’s business. Aaron Bady reminds us that “bourgeois reformers never *solve* the problems created by capitalism, because they cannot address the root causes; since you can’t just kill the poor, the next best thing is to move ‘blighted’ populations elsewhere, out of sight and out of mind. To ‘revitalize’ a city center, therefore, is to make room for capital development by moving unwanted and unproductive (and uncaptialized) people elsewhere.”<sup>7</sup> In Richard Florida’s initial argument, the active players are a creative class of biotech, dot.com, and financial innovators seemingly detached from the land/resource production of an earlier, more voracious era. I would argue that these “creative” financiers and entrepreneurs are more dependent on the resources being extracted from the land now than in the past, and increasingly detached from any knowledge of their dependency. I believe that most of us cannot name the relations that we are profoundly a part of when we live in these hives of capitalist relations that we denote as urban. I want to just bring to the fore that capitalisms do indeed produce “ways of life.” But I would not differentiate these by geography from something called the “land.” Any divide between these “geographies” is now oversimplified in an assessment of the United States as the pinnacle of neoliberal globalism as urban and rural: the rich urban elites versus the primarily rural white family forgotten by capital.

These great city-state nodes of capitalist urbanism are juxtaposed to places that continue to provide the United States with an imaginary that retains status as “the Real America.” These are places with frontier values,

whose people’s hard work and moral standards are what is needed to be “made great again.” Rural areas are not barren; nor are they frontiers, although the nostalgia for a “virgin frontier” lives on deeply in the white desire to be armed and landed. Moreover, they have never been solely “white,” not in history and not in the present, in regions that have known global settler immigration for two to three centuries.

The actual relations of land need to be clarified, and I begin this discussion with Standing Rock, itself, a place of long relations. The Lakota, a society that preceded the United States and the state of North Dakota by millennia, are presences that forever confound and question the imaginaries of the formation and legitimacy of the United States. For the United States, the Lakota always exist in “the barrens,” where rural white America demands a replaying of “the Indian Wars” every time the nation moves to take resources from Indian lands. These barrens are places where a pipeline route can be moved so as not to endanger settler capitalist water sources. Indigenous places are often imagined as isolated empty places, disposable, or usable places subordinate to national need. Indigenous peoples are not isolated, in a past, outside of capital, or without capitalist relations: we are central to them. We get past some kinds of “geographical” differences when we foreground other relations: the relations revealed, for instance, between the necessity and desire for life and clean water in African American communities in Flint, Michigan, juxtaposed with these needs in Standing Rock.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE “LAND”

When we enter the imaginary of the “pristine” or the “ecological” sans a human hand, we enter a dangerous illusion about “land.” Scott Lauria Morgenson mused on this feature of settler colonialism: “‘Empty land’ reminds us that the ontology of settler colonialism has been premised on its own boundlessness: always capable of projecting another horizon over which it might establish and incorporate a newest frontier.”<sup>9</sup> The ideology of unbridled Western progress resides in the worship of development. “Development,” even when debunked, underpins numerous assumptions about what non-Western epistemologies, ways of knowing, have to inform the present. We lose any sight of another set of relations, other values, when we discuss Indigenous peoples in multicultural discourses as minority populations in hierarchies of race. We lose the point of justice when we reduce the Indigenous to an appeal to liberal justice systems based on an additive formula for rights. I posit that environmental racism and environmental justice may have important overlapping interests with Indigenous interests, but we

cannot go forward without acknowledging their profound difference. There is a shift in relations between working from the perspective of Indigenism to working against environmental racism and for environmental justice. Here I want to take these differences, differences in epistemologies (ways of knowing) and ontologies (ways of being) into account.

The premise of a different knowledge organizing human life undergirds Indigenous relations in place. As Peter Morin (Tahltan) writes in "This Is What Happens When We Perform the Memory of the Land," *the land is us, it is in us*, in memory and resonance with living generations lived in close relation with places.<sup>10</sup> The difference between Western epistemological "land" as an environment and ecology and Indigenous place as relations with responsibility is a critical philosophical difference. Indigenous peoples' lifeways as ancient nations are different ontological and material interpretations of life that question and offer alternative imaginaries outside capitalism. The myriad Indigenous peoples who continue today practicing their heritage knowledge as daily, lived action, performed in ongoing relation with place, have ways of governing that perform what "ecology" implies. While none of these peoples are "outside" capitalism after hundreds of years of entanglement, they continue to act on principles and values that hold up different ideas about what might be lived. Their "modes of production," as Coulthard observes above, produce a different way of life, even when they have been severely disrupted.

Settler colonialism is evoked here when we position land as the primary desire of colonizing Western nation-states, a desire that forever seeks the death and disappearance of the Indigenous peoples who hold and who remain in deep relations with places.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous feminist theories illuminate statements and acts grounded in epistemologies representing more than "environmentally friendly" ways of being. These theories represent counterknowledge to capitalism itself. The Indigenous do not uniformly seek equality with nation-states, nor their recognition. Indigenism in practice often seeks to challenge capitalist ways of life for a futurity. As Sami feminist theorist Rauna Kuokkanen notes, "Indigenous peoples' struggle for self-determination, therefore, is also a struggle to exist as a collective in the future, which implies being able to decide about and have control over that future as a people."<sup>12</sup> This quest for autonomy rather than "equality" within capitalism's democracies marks an important difference. The ways of life that Indigenism practices are not inherent in Indigenous peoples' DNA but the result of myriad centuries of relations with places. Altered and sometimes compromised, these ways of life, "cultures," continue to serve up values that

need to be understood as alternative imaginaries that once existed all over the world.

Indigenous women are often foregrounded in these struggles for our values. Capitalism is a gendered hierarchy and violence against Indigenous women; this dominating characteristic of our lives in capitalism is not a just a by-product of settler colonialism, but one of its operating logics. In Indigenous societies, Kuokkanen reminds us, "Indigenous women play a crucial role in envisioning models of autonomy that do not merely replicate patriarchal, hierarchical structures that often reproduce the marginalization and subjugation of sections of society . . . [they] play a crucial role in maintaining and cultivating practices, systems, and bodies of knowledge, values, languages, modes of learning."<sup>13</sup> The outsize presence in this generation and past generations of women leaders in Indigenous resistance is not by chance. In each case, the leadership of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard and Faith Spotted Eagle among the Lakotas, and so many others, ground these movements. In the remainder of this chapter I ground myself to speak as one of myriad Northern peoples. As Natives, Alaskan Natives, or First Nations, we are reduced into the Western colonial imagination of an "Arctic" or "subarctic." As homelands, our names are many and varied. Dena, Inuit, Inupiaq, Unangan, and more are experiences of beauty in a scale of life and being that arrests the human mind from imagining itself as omnipresent. When confronted by what Standing Rock really means to me in this moment of personal, social, and political readjustment and recalibration, I want to go home in this chapter, because that is where my care is visceral.

The "Arctic" is a place where the capitalist nations imagine a world most alien from their own idea of a good life. These are places that the United States and Canada did not originally see as permanent homes for their citizens but only as places of extraction, of animals for fur, and of ores and oil. These places are now closely centered in the US and Canadian militarized need for security aroused by two twentieth-century wars and the rapidly melting ice that separates North America from Russia and Asia. We become the poster children for "climate change," more recently darkly characterized by Katherine McKittrick in a Twitter post as "ecocides of racial capitalism" (@demonicground, December 1, 2016). Our homes in circumpolar lands across the top of the globe have continuously been reimagined as perpetual "last frontier." What is meant by this perpetual "last frontier" status of our Indigenous homelands in the North? In the crosshairs of Jodi Byrd's "transits of empire" for three centuries, Indigenous lives in the Arctic have not been lived in isolation but in a frenzy of global capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

## HUNGER

I believe your nation might wish to see us, not as a relic from the past, but as a way of life, a system of values by which you may survive in the future. This we are willing to share.

PHILIP BLAKE (DENE FORT MCPHERSON)

Sandra Gologergen and Wilfred Miklahook, residents of Savoonga, stand together with Wilfred's arm encircling Sandra's small shoulders. Resolutely looking into the photographer's camera, they smile, capturing this moment in their lives. Behind them, their Yupik community goes about its business. Savoonga is one of two communities on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, 2,100 miles from Seattle and 37 miles from the Chukchi Peninsula of Russia. Interviewed for the National Public Radio (NPR) program *The Salt* by Clare Leschin-Hoar about Alaska's food insecurity, Sandra Gologergen speaks about the changes that have altered her relations to her people's food. In NPR's story, Savoonga residents do not speak only for their own experience; they become a proxy for a food crisis across the Arctic. NPR's story is related to hundreds of news stories now popping up in US and Canadian media outlets highlighting the warming of the Arctic. These St. Lawrence Island Yupik stand as a symbol for a multitude of changes in the Arctic, surfacing in the consciousness of the mainland United States, Canada, and the rest of the world as climate change. The interdependent relations between the land, the sky, and the animals that Savoonga once knew are changing faster than anyone anticipated.

Leschin-Hoar reported that Alaska's food insecurity rate averages around 14.4 percent, only a sliver above the US national average. The difference is how directly Alaskan Native peoples rely on their traditional foods, 295-plus pounds per person a year. At the same time, both distance from commercial grocery outlets and the price of shipping and fuel make replacing this diet in their home communities difficult, a serious problem with no easy answers. Food flown in from urban centers costs well above what these families can afford and is of notoriously poor nutritional quality. This "hunger" is deeper than it looks.<sup>15</sup>

Leschin-Hoar points to Savoonga's precarious relations with the capitalist food infrastructure, the chain of supply that feeds other places and peoples—or doesn't. Yet, Leschin-Hoar's NPR story ignores the full complexity of what the failure of the ice means in another set of relations. In Savoonga, a failure of old Yupik relations with ice and animals hastens the necessity of contemplating how to adapt to a rapidly melting homeland. The

Yupik's direct relations with the land, sea, and other life-forms, so at the level of obscurity in the capitalist imagination, have always meant more to them than a job that pays money that buys food. Food, in the sense that Sandra Gologergen speaks of it here, means something more that NPR doesn't fully articulate.

"Food," in an Indigenous sense, always evokes something larger than the direct consumption relations that the Indigenous have with animals, waters, and beings that give us life. "Food" necessarily evokes and produces cultures, economies, languages, kinships, reciprocal relations, and responsibilities that form a way of acting toward something larger than our individual human bodies and lives. For instance, there is no way to speak to a "Yupik culture" that does not evoke larger Yupik relations with and to the places that present generations inherited from the many hundreds of generations before them. These generations and their deep knowledge represent more than ten thousand years of experience with places and the changes that occur in those relations. Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq) and James Sakej Henderson (Choctaw) have written that "place" is an "expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their ecosystems, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands. . . . All aspects of knowledge are interrelated and cannot be separated from the traditional territories of the people concerned."<sup>16</sup> Indigenous place is infinitely more than geographical location. It is in every sense holistic, where all entities are bound in relations that interactively form societies, human and nonhuman. St. Lawrence Island is, in every Indigenous sense of the word, an Indigenous "place."

The 2002 study by Carol Jolles and Yupik elder and resident Elinor Mikaghaq Oozeva, *Faith, Food and Family in a Yupik Whaling Community*, chronicled life in Savoonga and Gambell (sister communities on St. Lawrence Island) as late as the early 1990s. Savoonga and Gambell were already experiencing rapid change then, but food wasn't the dire issue that it has now become. "Food" had a prominent place: "Food was obviously important. . . . The kinds of food consumed by a Gambell family and the manner in which food is served are considered to be the heart of being Yupik." While both communities had adapted Christianity to their needs in the same way that they had adapted technology, it was clear that an older order they practice was at the heart of their identity. In Gambell, the entire year and the community's social structure emerged from their relations with whales. As Jolles, who knew the community from 1987 on, observed, "Nowhere is that sense of identity, purpose, and distinctive order so evident as in the experience and tradition of sea mammal hunting, especially the hunt for *aghveq*, the great bowhead whale." The community's life was ordered by the hunt. The account

given by Jolles and Yupik elder advisor Elinor Oozeva is compelling: “Children’s games, courting activity, menstruation, pregnancy, maintenance of the land, and entry onto the land were regulated either partially or entirely by their relationship to hunting. Family celebrations, healing the sick, exchange [in marriage]—all were articulated with the hunt.”<sup>17</sup> These are relations with place and “environment” that are hardly imaginable in Westernized lives. In every sense of the word *environment*, then, the lands, waters (and ice) where these intimate interactions between people and marine life occurred over countless generations formed society, governance, and responsible relations among all present.

Glen Coulthard quotes a famous Dakota scholar, Vine Deloria Jr.: “[A] fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Savoonga is not endangered by a food shortage, where “food” is an interchangeable substance without relations, an abstract. The St. Lawrence Island peoples face an epistemological minefield in the years ahead as an order of life changes, with the changes to all their relations in their place. There is a rapidly changing environment that will alter many basic tenets of Northern life forever, and subsistence hunting in particular. The hunger families are reporting is real.

Yet, St. Lawrence Island, even as Elinor Oozeva gave her account of her people’s close-knit relations, had already lived in the midst of profound change for centuries. The lives of its people do not anchor any narrative about the inevitable march of progress and their transformations from some imagined pristine life. These Yupik, along with other Alaskan Natives, have already lived through several iterations of capitalist infrastructural invasions—enslavement, numerous “resource” extraction activities, and then as the center of a military logistics buildup that made them the first line of defense against a Soviet missile strike and turned one island into a nuclear testing site.<sup>19</sup> Along with numerous places in Alaska, St. Lawrence Island was a military site during and after World War II. After the war, the military abandoned many of these places, leaving dangerous chemicals in Inuit, Yupik, and Alaskan Native hunting and gathering places. It was Annie Alowa, a Savoonga elder and midwife, who sought attention to and research of the problem after she noticed high numbers of miscarriages and birth defects occurring in her community. Her findings sparked a United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues report in 2012 reporting the acute levels of toxic chemicals found on St. Lawrence and beyond.<sup>20</sup>

The Arctic is not and never has been *Terra Nullis* or the West’s “last frontier”: it is a crossroads and heart of Indigenous nations and their lifeways. What Westerners may mean by “last frontier” is that as a place, a frontier, it is imagined as “empty”: it becomes an empty signifier, a place perpetually reimagined for different Western interests. In part, this is Patrick Wolfe’s settler colonialism: a “land,” while not wholly imagined as a permanent home for settlers (as yet), is imagined as a process, a frontier of perpetual settler extraction. In the American Southwest these Indigenous places have been imagined as “national sacrifice areas.” The metamorphoses of different capitalist energy interests that have been undertaken in our Indigenous midst are the ecology of change in the North. Radical changes to our old relations are not recent. Indigenous lifeways must be examined as enduring rather than just precarious.

If the Arctic has long been touted as the last frontier in North America, our histories bear the marks of what this frontier means as “structure,” as an ongoing process rather than as an “event.” As a structure, “frontier” means the ongoing opening, abandonment, and reopening of extraction and transient exploitation of our lives and our places without Native consent. Settler colonialism’s interests in such “rural” or imagined “open” spaces are never naive or disinterested. To ignore so-called flyover places in the geo-imaginary of our present politics is to ignore the significant control of lands and resources basic to the capitalist economic need to consolidate its powers. To represent these places as “underdeveloped,” or merely as a disgruntled domain of right and alt-right white settlers who assert their “God-given” rights to land, guns, and employment, is to make an egregious misreading of what land and capital interests actually are in North America. The interests in these places, both in the United States and Canada, increasingly demand local white settler control (or conservative multicultural cooperation) to exploit resources at the same time they would like to disappear Native ways of life. The rural United States and interior Canadian provinces are home both to nation-states’ energy preserves and the Indigenous peoples that often bar access. The cities are interdependent with, never separate from, these places.

The stakes seem different when we do not understand Indigenism within its own relations. Our environmental and racial justice demands are made depending on our ability to reform capitalisms whose relations serve a deep axiom: the “survival of the fittest.” This axiom is often attributed to “nature.” These are not the only relations possible with “environments.” The “survival of the fittest” never existed except in Darwin’s mistaken humancentric,



Eurocentric nineteenth-century theory of life's relations as a mirror of nineteenth-century capitalism—a mistake that could be rendered only by a capitalist mind. Indigenism writ large knows that there are other readings of what our relations might be, other values that could be held, that must come into the conversations that inform all our struggles, that we must include—not to admonish, but to suggest.

In a scene from the 2004 film *Oil on Ice*, then-senator Frank Murkowski (R-Alaska) holds up a large, blank piece of white paper in a 2002 Senate hearing on the fate of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. “This is what it looks like about nine months of the year,” he said.<sup>21</sup> Murkowski’s depiction erases Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit’s relations to the planet, to the Gwich’in, to us all. This is a blindness that is far beyond the blank piece of paper the senator imagines. It is a world in which he cannot recognize any relations, where there are no relations that exist for him in a place he cannot imagine. It always comes back to the matter of relations. Now, in 2017, it is Frank Murkowski’s daughter, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), who engineers the inclusion of oil-drilling incursions in ANWR into the Republicans’ grand tax scheme, now being celebrated in Washington, DC. Gwich’in elder Sarah James, a forty-year veteran of the fight for the caribou calving grounds central to her people’s way of life, articulates the stakes of what the opening of ANWR means to her people: “We are the ones who have everything to lose.”<sup>22</sup> Our loss is most certainly not the Gwich’in’s alone. Who and what are your relations?

#### NOTES

- 1 See Audra Simpson and collective’s outstanding online syllabus and activist open forum site “#StandingRockSyllabus,” <https://nycstandwithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus>, accessed August 9, 2017.
- 2 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
- 3 Richard Florida, “The Racial Divide in the Creative Economy,” *City Lab*, 2016.
- 4 Norris, Vines, and Hoefel. “American Indian and Alaska Native Population,” 1.
- 5 Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2014, 65.
- 6 Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2014.
- 7 Aaron Bady, “None of You,” *Zunguzungu: The New Inquiry*, November 28, 2016, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/none-of-you>.
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