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**Author**

Nelson, Melissa K.

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# Wrestling with Fire: Indigenous Women's Resistance and Resurgence

Melissa K. Nelson

Struggle, as most social activists have attested,  
is an important tool in the overthrow of oppression and colonialism.  
—Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*

## MOTIVATIONS AND INSPIRATIONS

As activists, we call our work “struggle” because it seems never-ending. There appears to be no end point, no hope that the struggle will eventually end, even though deep down many of us yearn for and imagine a utopian, healthy future for all. Knowing struggle and desiring non-struggle is an ongoing labor of activism, whether the struggles are anti-nuclear, LGBTQ2, or, the focus of this essay, those of Indigenous women. These intersectional struggles fight oppression on many different levels and scales, from the personal to the planetary, the spiritual to the political, the human to the cosmological. Our struggles are about not only fighting and resisting, but also the human capacity to learn, grow, connect, repair, and love, despite the ongoing brutal atrocities continuing and expanding on the Earth today.

I started identifying as a scholar-activist some time in graduate school in the late 1990s, when I realized how different, and yet how complementary, these roles are. I see their activities as interdependent: to study/act, reflect/experiment, review/revitalize, critique/disrupt, and analyze/strategize. As I reflect on it, I recall embracing these complementary roles as soon as I went to college and began to volunteer with Native American organizations in the mid-1980s. Studying Native issues was not enough for

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MELISSA K. NELSON is professor of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State University and president of the Cultural Conservancy. She is the editor of and a contributor to *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* (2008) and *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (2018). She is Anishinaabe/Métis, a citizen of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Nation.

me. I lived as a guest in Native (Chumash) territory and felt I should do something with the local Native community. The passion to serve Indigenous communities and create positive social change has driven me since my late teens and now study and action are deeply interwoven in my life. However, I only became a “professional” activist in 1993, with minimal pay, when I started working for a Native-led organization, the Cultural Conservancy, which I still serve. I became an official “scholar” in 2002, when I was employed as an assistant professor by San Francisco State University. I have come to realize that, despite my efforts to self-reflect and to integrate these different roles, I have not fully thought through how and why I do these different “jobs,” especially my activism, and have been taking some things for granted.

This essay is an opportunity to more critically explore these experiences and share what I have learned about the activist struggle. It is also an opportunity to review and recognize other Indigenous women activists and their relationship to struggle, or what I call “wrestling with fire.” I honor the many women, elders, teachers, and mentors who have inspired and continue to motivate me in this work. I think of some of my strongest sources of inspiration and mentorship, Winona LaDuke, Mililani Trask, Priscilla Settee, Jeannette Armstrong, Katsi Cook, Robin Kimmerer, and so many others. Many of these people came of age during the civil rights and Red Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, so their activism often was, and is, urgent, radical, and effectively disruptive to the status quo. There continues to be an important role for militancy in Indigenous activism, although my approach has been different. I also recognize and thank those great mentors, women and men, who have journeyed to the spirit world: Paula Gunn Allen, Nilak Butler, Elouise Cobell, John Mohawk, Jack Forbes, and Louis Owens, many of whom fought for space in the academy to make university learning more relevant to American Indian communities and opened the path so that I could take courses in, and now teach, Native studies.

In this essay, I particularly reflect on the critical theoretical work of Leanne Simpson, Melanie Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, and Donna Haraway,<sup>1</sup> and later the extraordinary applied work of Indigenous activists Sage LaPena, Caleen Sisk, and Rowen White. The *co-madres* of this journal issue are also major leaders and thinkers in this important inquiry into indigeneity, feminism, and activism, and I bow to them for this shared commitment to struggle and liberation.

Based on my learning process thus far, especially in questioning Eurocentric paradigms and centering Indigenous worldviews, I am confident about several of this essay’s foundational assumptions and assertions and make them explicit here:

- (1) nonhuman nature offers more intelligent and resilient models for positive change and adaptive survival than human history;
- (2) Indigenous peoples hold access to forms of knowledge and ways of learning that are critically important to the survival of humanity and other threatened life forms. These knowledge forms are profoundly connected to nonhuman models;
- (3) non-Western spiritual traditions and stories (however altered and mistranslated) contain seeds of wisdom for resisting the global state of “post-industrial pre-collapse” based on colonial-capitalistic hegemony; and

(4) Indigenous women are rising and leading a new era of integrated activism based on Indigenous values and practices, especially in relation to water and fire.

## WORD ROOTS OF STRUGGLE AND RESISTANCE

The word *struggle* has uncertain origins in the English language. According to the online etymology dictionary, the word is compared to trampling and wrestling. It seems to be connected to the Old Norse *bstrugr*, “ill will.” Others suggest a connection to Dutch *struikelen*, German *straucheln*, “to stumble.”<sup>2</sup> These root meanings don’t speak to the way most Indigenous activists use the term in social movements today. Indigenous activist work is not about trampling or stumbling, although I know I and many others stumble at times, and inadvertently and explicitly trample. Also, struggle is generally not about “ill will,” although I admit it is hard not to feel some sense of ill-will or revenge against the perpetrators of gross injustices; I think about why I enjoy Quentin Tarantino films that are all basically revenge films that address issues like Nazism and Black slavery; I think about the active defense of “taking up arms” in the 1960s by the Black Panther and American Indian movements that needed to defend themselves against police corruption and brutality—but that was about protection, not revenge.

For many of us in Indigenous movements, the ill-will impulse is minimized and counter to our philosophical and ethical foundations, which focus on a greater impulse for positive social transformation and the dual principle of peace and justice, for all humans (including enemies) and our interspecies relatives and lands and waters. Struggle is deeply philosophical and psychological, yet these values and strategies rise out of the daily, lived experiences of “othered” peoples. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, “People, families, organizations in marginalized communities struggle every day; it is a way of life that is necessary for survival, and when theorized and mobilized can become a powerful strategy for transformation.”<sup>3</sup>

In terms of defining struggle within the Indigenous movement and my own experience as a scholar-activist, I find the term *wrestle* much more aligned and appropriate. It resonates with decolonial work as it is a physical and psychological sorting and grappling of ideas and patterns that need to be shifted. Based on the verb “to wrest,” “wrestle” is linked to bending, turning, and twisting, actions and strategies that are necessary in this work.<sup>4</sup> This is how rivers flow and creatures move through the landscape: I remember Chickasaw law professor Sakej Henderson explaining why, in one Native language, the words for “snake” and “duck” were almost the same. At first the source of this linguistic connection baffled my Western-science-classifying mind, and then he moved his hand in the way that both snakes and ducks move, side-to-side, twisting and turning across the landscape. As an Anishinaabe-ikwe (Anishinaabe woman), I know that these are wise relatives and teachers worthy of being mimicked, especially for decolonial activism. Snakes, ducks, and rivers remind us the best way to point B is not necessarily a straight line. As Joanne Barker asserts in the introductory article in this AICRJ special issue, “water teaches us to think about knowledge in continuous movement, transition, and change” (6).

Struggling and wrestling are ongoing personal, collective, and political processes and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples and social justice workers in social movements. We are, as Anishinaabe poet Kristi Leora Gansworth succinctly puts it, “witnessing and sidestepping and circumventing the strong and violent spirits that have swept across and into the land, extracting and strangling and contaminating all of our relations; it seems that such energies will never stop digging, pushing, taking.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, then, resistance must be central to the concept of struggling—resisting invasion, discrimination, extraction, violence, commodification, or any force thrust upon us without our consent.

The concept of resistance has a long and important history in the study of global and American social movements.<sup>6</sup> Both social justice movements and the academic field of ethnic studies conceive of resistance as critique, interrogation, objection, circumvention, protest, disruption, and decolonization, whereas political resistance challenges hegemonic power on the ground, which may or may not happen in the academy. Indigenous peoples, people of color, and other marginalized peoples are actively resisting ongoing, oppressive colonial systems of control and domination that impede self-determination and liberation. Additionally, Indigenous resistance is closely connected to persistence and the ways that we can construct alternative, counter-hegemonic systems rooted in sovereignty, self-determination, and self-governance. It is deeply connected to Gerald Vizenor’s concept of “survivance,” which importantly requires “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.”<sup>7</sup> Hence wrestling implies all of these elements: struggle, resistance, and survivance are the interwoven strands that hold us up and together, to continue.

Other fields also deeply explore the concept of resistance. In biology, for example, the body’s immune system resists foreign viruses, bacteria, parasites, and other pathogens that can harm our health and create disease. In psychotherapy, resistance is a paradoxical response; as patients get closer to the bottom of a problem, they feel more resistance to exploring it despite their conscious desire to do so. This psychological resistance to explore unexamined assumptions and behaviors, also known as the denial mechanism, signals unconscious thoughts that cause repeated harm, but which seem to us to be absolutely necessary because these assumptions have become essential to our sense of survival—even when they are not. Karl Jung famously observed that “what you resist not only persists, but will grow in size,” a psychology that also aligns with Buddhist philosophy. In the sense that psychological resistance strengthens your attraction to what you resist, Buddhists would probably agree with the claim of the Borgs in *Star Trek*—“resistance is futile.”<sup>8</sup> A related truism, “you become what you hate,” distills Friedrich Nietzsche’s well-articulated warning, “beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster, for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”<sup>9</sup>

The aim of the Borgs was cultural assimilation of a foreign species on a large scale—similar to the large political-level colonialism that impacted Native America—yet the potent challenge “resistance is futile” still gives me pause when I confront the

reality that resistance is a primary tool of human-scale activism. Further, the work of activist struggle and resistance is fraught with contradictions and conundrums, given that we face many binaries or complementarities, including accept/resist, individual/collective, inner/outer, personal/political, control/release, struggle/relax, protect/extend, and many others: within the larger existential balance of creation and destruction, much wrestling takes place.

Inherent in wrestling these paradoxical impulses and actions is an ongoing process of being active and staying present with one's body, family, community, tribe, nation, world, and environment: to respond to, and address, the pressing issues at hand. Key qualities for response are open listening and observing, as well as a plethora of emotions ranging from outrage and anger to grief and compassion—all of which filter through our own unique and contingent histories and idiosyncrasies. These critical qualities help us understand our own impulses and values and to facilitate more ethical and authentic responses than our knee-jerk reactions, which often are counterproductive rather than strategic. When I am in resistance mode, there is often a struggle that verges on hopelessness and despair, or an anger that can feel toxic. When it is transformed to resurgence, I am filled with a fierce compassion and surge of positive energy to continue through the struggle to do the work at hand.

## THEORETICAL GROUND

Today people are actively responding to the violation of immigrants at the US/Mexico border, protesting the ongoing privatization of fresh water in too many places, and marching in the streets for women's rights and Black Lives Matter, to name just a few struggles. For all of the dark, harrowing, and brutal events, there is the struggle to end such violence against the Earth and for life to continue. Responding with right action means we employ a wide variety of tools and strategies, from resistance, and what some call "constructive resistance,"<sup>10</sup> to what North America Indigenous communities, especially in Canada, often call "resurgence." Anishinaabe writer and scholar Leanne Simpson powerfully articulates the importance of resurgence as well as the need for a "radical resurgence" in her book *As We Have Always Done*. Radical resurgence "requires a deeply critical reading of settler colonialism and Indigenous response to the nation-state. Radical resurgence requires us to critically and thoroughly look at the roots of the settler colonial settler-capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and anti-Blackness."<sup>11</sup> Simpson makes a distinction between "cultural" resurgence—or cultural revitalization without necessarily addressing land dispossession—and "political" resurgence, which is a "direct threat to settler sovereignty."<sup>12</sup>

In a similar move, Melanie Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, building on the work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, distinguish among approaches to decolonization, especially by settler-allies: "If settler-engaged projects do not advance the repatriation of Indigenous life and land, Tuck and Yang remind us, these projects cannot be called decolonial; they are nothing more than settler moves to innocence that keep colonial relations and settler privilege intact."<sup>13</sup> According to Yazzie and Risling Baldy, a "radical relationality" confronts settler privilege directly and, interestingly, is

linked to ontologies of water. As they define it, radical relationality is “the ontology of being-in-relation-to that describes all life and futurity; keeping ourselves open to the possibility of making new relatives is one of the essential functions of life and, indeed, decolonization.”<sup>14</sup> Indigenous women’s resurgence is profoundly tied to making new relatives, and, perhaps more essentially, to renewing our ability to care and live in reciprocal relations with the relatives that give us life, especially the core elements of water, air, soil, and fire.

Leanne Simpson and I are both citizens of the Anishinaabeg Confederacy. The Anishinaabeg have many different nations, tribes, bands, and diversities within this Confederacy, on both sides of the United States/Canadian colonial border. Despite those differences, as Anishinaabe-ikwegaw we have given to us by Gitche Manitou, the Great Mystery, explicit responsibilities to take care of our people and ancestral lands. That is what we are also told that humans are here to do, to take care of that which gives us life. We must honor the gift of life by “returning the gift.”<sup>15</sup> As women, we also have the responsibility of being “mothers of our nations,” and keepers of the waters and the seeds. These responsibilities come with particular duties and practices that we must maintain, renew, and pass on to the next generation. Indigenous women activists carry a large burden basket filled with many obligations and assignments. And there is, of course, tending to our own inner ecologies, the water and flesh of our bodies, and the winds and fires of our internal climates. Swimming to stay above water at the confluence of these different currents, trying to balance both these outer obligations and internal passions and visions and move forward is another struggle.

Yet that is the existential *raison d’être* for those of us who identify as activists. Wrestling with the struggle of inner and outer ecologies and political and personal obligations is an ongoing tension. Given that availability and service to our communities and causes is often 24/7, it is not surprising that many activists struggle with burnout and health challenges.<sup>16</sup> This urgency for change can be a significant burden; however, it is also an ethical obligation and aspiration that is fueled by a fierce passion for co-creation; there is a visceral, creative quality to it as well. This “flame of discontent” provides energy for wrestling and resurgence. As Simpson reminds us, “Gzhwe Manidoo (the creator) created the world by struggling, failing, and by trying again and again in some of our stories.”<sup>17</sup> Struggle is inherent to life.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, which takes up the wrestling process of activism, Donna Haraway speaks of the responsibility felt by many of us: “in passion and action, detachment and attachment, this is what I call response-ability; that is also collective knowing and doing, an ecology of practices.”<sup>18</sup> She demonstrates that this process is laden with contradictory impulses (such as attachment/detachment) and crucially, focuses on the foundational ability to *respond*. As ways to manage the process of struggle, I also appreciate her emphasis on an “ecology of practices,” cacophonous as it often is. But *Staying with the Trouble* is not primarily about creating the future. Rather, Haraway’s central argument “requires learning to be fully present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts or apocalyptic or salvific futures but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense, activism and resurgence, struggle and decolonization, are



truly about now, the present, the breath of being and the simultaneous holding of the pain and joy of situational presence. When being present and receptive in these spaces, one can hear the subtle and unseen, the wings of a hummingbird, or the ancestors in a forest. These transcognitive experiences of interspecies kinship, of “life-affirming-life,” are the fuel for my activism.

Haraway further suggests that, “the task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.”<sup>20</sup> Haraway’s recommendations, which include struggle, wrestling, and resurgence, are refreshingly honest and insightful. In my experience working with Indigenous women activists, from time to time, we all need to find places of solace from the persistent and noisy struggle, including those on the front line protesting extraction and desecration, strategists at kitchen tables or computers in nonprofit offices, or those who make trouble using “word arrows” in academia and science.<sup>21</sup> If we turn to our other-than-human kin for guidance, can we learn ecologies of practice that simultaneously “make trouble” and “rebuild quiet places?”

For this noisy struggle is not just a subjective nuisance. Every day, every minute, humans are witnessing and unwittingly participating in profound destruction of life (species extinction, water and air pollution, soil mining, extraction of “resources,” which we call relatives, and so on). Our extended kin of bees and condors, sea turtles and red wolves, mountaintops and sweet waters are daily violated. Given these threats and violations, upholding my Anishinaabeg mandate for *minobimaadaziwin*, a good, healthy life, is daunting.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, growing social injustices—poverty, incarceration, homelessness, violence, and multiple threats from climate chaos to nuclear war—sometimes make it hard to get out of bed.

To analyze and share our responses is meaningful, as social activists all have different approaches and strategies. As Yazzie and Risling Baldy share, “it is important not to downplay the actual complexity and conflict that has characterized these struggles.”<sup>23</sup> For me, one of the challenges is to be responsive not reactionary, and to be authentic, kind, and strategic in my actions. This means embodying fierce kindness in many situations, as my ancestors and future generations are witnessing my actions. The “DNA” of my human genealogy, or “Descendants-N-Ancestors,” are not the only ones watching: so is the “staring, unsleeping eye of the Earth” herself, for as Rotuman filmmaker Vilsoni Hereniko has reminded us, “the land has eyes, and teeth.”<sup>24</sup>

## THE RESURGENCE OF FIRE

According to many Indigenous oral traditions, creation and destruction have always balanced the world, from the beginning of time. The creation story of Cahuilla people of the Mojave Desert in Southern California is instructive, telling of twin-brother gods, Mukat and Temayawet, who constantly competed, bickered, and fought. Mukat was thoughtful and careful, but Temayawet was impulsive and rash. Temayawet, the god who makes earthquakes, went underground after becoming angry and



embarrassed for creating ugly, distorted people. Mukat's people, on the other hand, were smooth, brown, and beautiful and stayed above ground. After a while, however, even Mukat started acting out, threatening his beautiful people, and even creating death. In response, his people conspired to kill him through the cleverness of the bewitching Frog. After the death of their creator, the people burned him and scattered his ashes throughout their land. To this day, all the food and plants born to feed the people are from Mukat's ashes.<sup>25</sup>

This "evil twin" motif is found across the globe in pre- and post-colonial stories and appears to be archetypal. Sapling and Flint, the twins of good and evil in the Haudenosaunee Creation story, were also born of Sky Woman, and also appear in many other Indigenous oral literatures.<sup>26</sup> Birth, emergence, and arrival; death, disappearance, and renewal. Beginnings and endings, composing and decomposing, parallel universes of creation and destruction caught in an endless tango spiraling through the known and unknown multiverses. In these stories and Indigenous ways of being, the line between good and evil, and the seen and unseen, is a very thin veil for some, but thick as granite for others. At this confluence of creation and destruction, where do we find practices of renewal and transformation? How can we best become activists able to embrace our indigeneity and feminism while also maintaining creative balance and liberation?

On May 3, 2018, on the Big Island of Hawaii, one of the world's most active volcanoes, Kilauea, began to erupt and set off a series of major earthquakes. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, thousands of people evacuated, and massive amounts of molten lava and toxic gasses were released, making new land as the lava reached the Pacific Ocean and growing the island. To the Hawaiian people, the Volcano is Pele, and she is a Goddess. As a *New York Times* article reports, "Expressing reverence for their deity, many living in Kilauea's shadow welcome its eruption—even when it destroys their homes." The article quotes the words of Kimo Awai, a hula teacher and lecturer on Hawaiian culture: "we believe in 40,000 gods, but Pele is in the highest echelon for obvious reasons.... Pele created Hawaii; she is that primordial force that exists within all land masses. And she can be vengeful, so watch out."<sup>27</sup> Pele clearly, if not painfully, embodies being both a creator and destroyer of land and life. But this process is violent: erupting plumes of splintered glass and red-hot lava incinerates any homes or life form it touches. The shards of glass are considered Pele's hair, and the lava rocks left behind are her tears.<sup>28</sup> Earthquakes of 6.9 magnitude and greater occur without warning, shaking and breaking houses and opening up massive rivers of lava in the Earth. She is literally creating new land that can grow new life and begin another cycle of birth, growth, death, and renewal, but there are many sacrifices along the way. She is a fierce, divine feminine power that invokes fear and awe.

I am intrigued by Pele's eruptions, disruptions, and creations and their timing. Her last major eruption was in the 1980s. Is this Pele being vengeful, as Kuma Awai indicates, and if so, why? Alternatively, is she merely responding to the amount of pressure being placed on her, or trying to remind humans of whom is truly in charge? What does her recent 2018 extreme activity tell us about the role of creation and destruction in the renewal of the Earth, and how might our efforts to understand her

message inform Indigenous activism today, as I think it can? Other creative destroyers from other traditions include the Hindu goddess Kali, another feminine teacher of the regenerative power of fierceness and destruction. She is a destroyer of illusion, slayer of evil with her blood-soaked sword and belt of severed heads, indicating her role as a black goddess of fire and divine protector of liberation. However, while Kali is an important religious icon, a sacred mythical being to Hindu people around the world, Pele is an embodied raging volcano that impacts all near her, regardless of belief in or knowledge of her as a symbolic Fire goddess.

On October 8, 2017 in Northern California, a fire broke out that became known as the “Northern California Firestorm.” One of the most deadly fires in California history, it burned more than 250,000 acres, destroyed nearly 9,000 buildings, and killed forty-four people. About a year later, the whole town of Paradise, California basically was incinerated in six hours when the Camp Fire erupted on November 15, 2018. This is the deadliest and worst fire in California’s recorded history, with eighty-six fatalities and nearly 20,000 homes and buildings destroyed. In this place, “Paradise on fire” was not a metaphor but a lived reality for thousands of people. Every late summer and fall thereafter, local residents are cautious and prepare for what we hope and pray won’t be another “worst fire.”

Fire is known as a great cleanser, purifier, and destroyer. Indigenous peoples the world over know that fire is also an ally and important tool but must always be respected and balanced with water and other elements. Many of humanity’s first stories of life include “stealing fire” and capturing fire for the people. As California Native historian William Bauer, Jr. writes, “Fire was the forge in which human beings were created.”<sup>29</sup> Fire provides heat, light, the opportunity to cook food, boil water, capture game, make tools, cleanse under brush, replenish soil, remove insects and pests, enhance certain plant populations, and a host of other ecological and cultural benefits. The local Northern California Indian tribes had an extensive relationship with fire and continue to perform regular “cultural burns” to take care of the land and manage the native plant and animal communities and ecosystem processes of California’s rare biodiversity.<sup>30</sup>

More unprecedented devastating fires are occurring in the Amazon, the Arctic, and Australia, where fires massively increased in 2019–2020. The oldest civilization continuing to exist is that of Indigenous peoples of Australia, who have been great allies with fire in managing land.<sup>31</sup> As Noel Butler, a Budawang elder from the Yuin Nation, said, “I think this is a wake-up call not only for Australia but for the rest of the world. You cannot just destroy the land. You cannot destroy what keeps you alive.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, for centuries, or millennia, Indigenous peoples have been warning about this time and reminding people that fire is also a creator, not just a destroyer; it is an ally not an enemy. Is fire itself showing up so strongly now, in the North American West and around the Earth, to make us listen, and to wake up?

Clearly, climate disruption is a major factor for the increase in wildfires; we know that the cause is fossil fuel extraction, consumption, and their waste products, such as carbon dioxide, methane, and other pollutants. Indigenous territories have been continuously exploited for energy resources and by fossil fuel and other

energy companies since colonial times (and especially since the Industrial Revolution), whether coal and uranium mining at Navajo Nation, tar sands mining in Dene and Cree territory, nuclear waste disposal on Mojave and Laguna Pueblo lands, or pipelines through the Standing Rock Sioux Nation. The number of climate justice organizations and campaigns resisting this addiction to fossil fuels has grown tremendously in the last ten years, with major leaders coming from Native groups, such as the fierce Mandan leader Kandi Mossett of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) and Athabasca Chipewyan leader Eriel Deranger of Indigenous Climate Action.

But the increasingly warming planet is not the only cause of recent massive, destructive wildfires. Ironically, among other factors are the policies of “land preservation” imposed by non-Indigenous management that prohibit human intervention. The dominant society, rooted in colonialism and capitalism, has been resisting and fearing fire for so long that it has been suppressed and practically eliminated from the land for a hundred years or more. After early colonists invaded North America, one of the first actions they took, and later, the US government took, was to make Indian fires illegal. According to Lightfoot and Parrish, “prohibitions against Indians torching the landscape were enacted as early as 1793 by Spanish colonial administrators,”<sup>33</sup> and after the establishment of the US Forest Service in 1905, a comprehensive fire policy was established.<sup>34</sup> A study of early nineteenth century fire policy explains that “as a reaction to these often destructive, high-intensity fires, fire control became the dominant philosophy in the early 20th century and fire use became illegal in most states. Fire was viewed solely as a destructive force that threatened a growing nation’s timber supply.”<sup>35</sup>

A history of land expropriation and the resulting discrediting and erasure of Indigenous land-care practices, such as cultural burning or “controlled fires,” has meant that forests have grown tremendously, taking over meadows and becoming thick with dead biomass that increases pests and disease and under certain conditions, serves as fuel. Fire needs three elements: oxygen, fuel, and ignition. There is no fire without plants, as they provide both oxygen and fuel, so fire and plants are deeply interconnected, two elements of a long-term, evolutionary relationship. Ignition is the third, classically lightning, but now humans take on that role, either through negligence or intent. Now, when forest fires do start, caused by either lightning or humans, they are catastrophic and widespread. After a century or more of fire suppression, fossil-fuel burning, and pyrophobia, fire is coming back in a powerfully destructive way to cleanse and purify the land. It removes the dead and diseased trees and overgrowth; it incinerates everything back to primal ash—which may be the fate of all life, as the Earth continuously warms in a runaway greenhouse effect and catastrophic fires become the norm.

Fire is feared for many good reasons. As an essential ecological process, natural fire cleanses and renews biodiversity all over the Earth. But to do so, fire literally burns, scorches, incinerates, and cremates life. Fire is such a voracious consumer of plants and forests that it has been called a “global herbivore.”<sup>36</sup> From the Judeo-Christian and Eurocentric worldviews, fire is a symbol for hell and the devil, something evil and to be feared, controlled, and oppressed. Fire is deeply and often unconsciously associated with Indigenous peoples and witches in the psyche of settler society. The word “savage”

comes from the French *sauvage* and Latin *salvaticus* meaning untamed, primitive, and pagan. It shares the root word of silviculture and being “of the woods.”<sup>37</sup> So, savagery, whether in the land or people, is associated with the uncontrollable and uncivilized. Natives and women of the forest (witches) reside in a place where evil lurks. Eve and her “fall from Paradise” is also part of this tacit understanding that women are untrustworthy and dangerous. In addition to Indigenous peoples and nonconforming women, fire and evil have been associated with anyone who does not conform to Christian values of patriarchy, property, capitalism, gender, and whiteness, especially non-gender-conforming people; for example, the word “faggot” means “bundle of sticks.”<sup>38</sup> Fire’s power incites both extreme resistance (fear) and zealotry, such as in the historic witch burnings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe as well as modern-day hate criminals who burn places of worship.

But what if humans did not resist and deny fire nor use it for destructive purposes, but befriended fire as an ally, as so many Indigenous communities have done? Mohawk scholar Elizabeth Hoover explores the concept of “pyropolitics,” coined by philosopher Michael Marder, to share her work at the Water Protector Camps at Standing Rock. She writes, “the language of fire has also been used in illustrative ways to describe how social movements spark, flare, and sometimes sputter out. A spark of an idea will spread like wildfire among believers, until people, coming up against too many barriers and too few victories, become burned out.” Referring to the “flames, sparks, immolations, incinerations, and burning in political theory and practices,” Hoover emphasizes that fire is an apt metaphor for social movements.<sup>39</sup>

Other Indigenous women see and use fire as a metaphor for and connection to psychological and spiritual states. For example, Nomtipom Wintu ethnobotanist, herbalist, and agro-ecologist Sage LaPena responds to fire with a unique and powerful message. At a Cultural Conservancy spring planting event at the Indian Valley Organic Farm and Garden in Novato, California, LaPena shared an insightful observation: that Mother Earth’s fire is out of control and out of balance today because Native peoples have been forbidden to tend to her and so our own internal fires are also out of balance.<sup>40</sup> She went on to say, “every single fire of our synapses is an electrical impulse that is lightning, that is connected to Mother Earth.” She implies that the activities of our minds are our internal fires and that thoughts are forms of lightning that ignite different types of “fires.” As Nilak Butler, the late Inuit activist and co-founder of the Indigenous Women’s Network, often said, “I am a reflection of the Earth herself”; what is happening to the Earth is happening to women’s bodies and vice versa.<sup>41</sup> We know that the health or toxicity of our environment is reflected in the health or toxicity of women’s bodies. LaPena extends this thought, saying that fire suppression or expression on the land is reflecting the suppression or expression of fire internally (emotionally/spiritually) in humans.<sup>42</sup>

Other Indigenous women leaders, such as Winnemem Wintu chief and spiritual leader Caleen Sisk, echo this traditional teaching about fire and human responsibility. She talks about the need to rebalance our relationship with fire and water, as they are intimately connected and desperately out of balance right now. In 2015, she held a ceremonial gathering on sacred Mount Shasta in order to address this imbalance

and remember traditional teachings about how we must honor, pray to, and give thanks to the gift of fire and water so they know we have not forgotten them. She eloquently shares:

as you sit before the fire, that light of life is going to be right on you. We are asking that fire to take care of us, we are asking that light of life if we can take that next step, and have the courage, not be afraid, when we have a chance to speak up for fire and water, for the salmon, for the bears, for the wolves, everything that is under attack right now, that we do our part as we can but we have to heal ourselves too we have to have two feet on the ground and be able to balance our life in some way so we can reach out to help other people, other things, other ways.<sup>43</sup>

Given these teachings, I join these women in proposing that the uncontrolled fires—and droughts and flooding and eruptions and other extreme climatic and geologic events—in the “environment,” mirror the uncontrolled fires, droughts, floods, and eruptions occurring “inside” the minds and psyches of people. Of course, “inside” needs to be questioned, especially given Indigenous epistemologies that do not center the self “inside” a human individual as the Eurocentric worldview does. Yet, without a doubt, humans globally are displaying extreme imbalances that manifest as depression and other mental and physical health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. Socially we see grotesque examples in gun violence, terrorism, human trafficking, murdered and missing Indigenous women, and suicide and drug epidemics. Put simply, the land and natural elements are “out of control” and responding to the out-of-control humans. When the land and our own species are showing such extreme signs of disease and disequilibrium, we must pay close attention. Many Indigenous worldviews are based on the understanding that humans are responsible to care for the land, so we humans are fundamentally responsible for these imbalances. But Indigenous peoples did not stop taking care of the land by choice; they have been forced to stop doing this sacred work by colonial oppression. Consequently, inner and outer fire has been suppressed and denied for so long that it is coming back with a vengeance.

Mohawk seed-keeper Rowen White, also an Indigenous woman activist, writes about “fertile resistance and reconciliation” through the power of native seeds. She lets the seeds know that she, as an Indigenous woman seed keeper, remembers their power and the early agreements made with them to nourish life. White eloquently writes about the rage and grief of those who have forgotten those agreements and dominate seeds with colonial capitalism and privatization:

Honestly, some days I am filled with rage, which I work diligently at composting into rich soil to nourish the resistance efforts to renew our sacred agreements with our seeds. Some days I am overcome with a grief so palpable that it is nearly paralyzing; that we have allowed the sacred and reverent relationships to collectively atrophy in our food systems to the point that most people have nearly forgotten their agreements.<sup>44</sup>

Indigenous women's struggles are deep and diverse. On an activist level, we are working to restore fire to the land, protect sacred waters from contamination, safeguard seeds from genetic modification, prepare for numerous "natural disasters" due to climate chaos, find justice for murdered and missing women, and continuously care for our families, communities, lands, and nations.

As I claimed earlier and hope that I have demonstrated, Indigenous women are rising and leading a new era of integrated activism based on Indigenous values and practices—yet it is a struggle. Among other many roles, they are leading movements, nations, organizations, campaigns, universities, and communities, as theorist-activists, scholar-activists, spiritual leaders, seed keepers, botanists, chefs, lawyers, and poets, while being informed by tribally specific Indigenous values and the intelligence of their lands and waters. As Indigenous peoples, as human beings, we are invited again to "wrestle with fire" within and without. My Anishinaabeg teachings tell me that humans are obliged to rebalance our relationships with our internal and outer climates as a form of resistance and resurgence; that includes land, water, skies, stars, animals, plants, others, and the unseen.

As Indigenous women, we work to maintain our original instructions that outline Indigenous ways of being in reciprocal relationship with the regenerative power of fire and water. It is important to minimize their harmful and destructive capacities and enhance their ability to heal, restore, cleanse, and renew life. And as humans, we have those same capacities to create and destroy. We are made of fire and water and are of the same elements, even though we appear more as mirrors, reflecting dynamic changes in complex feedback systems.

On the volcanic edges of creation and destruction, birth and rebirth, Indigenous women are leading and "staying with the trouble." With the resilience of our inherent strengths and survivance, we find ecologies of practice in many ways. Friendship, solidarity, and "radical relationality" are critical ways to combat sorrow and grief with reverential reciprocity and belonging. Our cultural teachings and the medicines of the land, specifically water and fire, give us epistemological and pragmatic resistance to the corporate, cannibal mindset that is ravaging our lands and peoples. For example, we are strengthened by the medicines in the land and in our traditional stories. Cree scholar-activist Priscilla Settee recalls a teaching she learned from Cree elder Simon Kytwayhat in the 1990s. He told her that we could always find solace in the Seven Healing Fires: singing, dancing, laughing, talking, listening, playing, and crying.<sup>45</sup> As I conclude this essay, I reflect on my role as a scholar-activist and understand that it is these healing fires, ecologies of practice, and the solidarity and wisdom of Indigenous women that fortifies my abilities to wrestle with the struggle of activism and fuels my passion for radical resurgence.



## NOTES

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