

Progressive Reckonings, Indigenous Feminist Praxis, and Resisting the Common Roots of  
Reproductive and Climate Injustice

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Andrew Frederick Smith, Drexel University

Mercer Gary, Drexel University

Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner, University of Maryland

Joel Michael Reynolds, Georgetown University

Abstract:

White progressives in the U.S. are currently experiencing two profound reckonings that typically are assumed to be unrelated. On the one hand, the *Dobbs* verdict overturned the assumption that the *right to choose* with respect to abortion is too socially entrenched, juridically settled, or politically sacred to be denied. On the other hand, climatological conditions of possibility for comfortable existence are increasingly under threat in locales in which residents have come to expect to enjoy secure lives and livelihoods. This essay highlights what Indigenous communities across the U.S. already know well. Namely, threats to reproductive freedom and climate crisis are neither new nor separable. Both phenomena have common colonial roots that continue to proliferate. Each is a result of the disruption and destruction of Indigenous kinship assemblages. Indeed, in aiming to remediate their current reckonings, white progressives routinely (if unthinkingly) support forms of settler state violence that perpetuate reproductive and climate injustice in Indigenous communities. We appeal to white progressives, notably including white feminists, to embrace the proposition that their reckonings cannot be properly understood

nor successfully addressed without prioritizing Indigenous futurity. We call for centering forms of Indigenous feminist praxis that facilitate robust Indigenous coalitions of anti-colonial resistance.

## 1. Introduction

White progressives in the U.S. are currently experiencing two profound reckonings that typically are assumed to be unrelated. On the one hand, the *Dobbs* verdict overturned the assumption that the *right to choose* with respect to abortion is too socially entrenched, juridically settled, or politically sacred to be denied. With the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, the future of reproductive freedom, bodily integrity, and autonomous family planning have been newly jeopardized, affecting even those white Americans untouched by prior restrictions. On the other hand, climatological conditions of possibility for comfortable existence are increasingly under threat in locales in which residents have come to expect to enjoy secure lives and livelihoods. As elsewhere across the globe, privileged communities in the U.S. long insulated from climate crisis are now at risk. Both reproductive injustice and climate crisis have been subject to extensive public discussion in recent years. Warnings about the acceleration of both have grown more fervent, particularly in the face of additional adverse Supreme Court rulings. Yet these discussions rarely intersect.

In this essays, we highlight what Indigenous communities across the U.S. already know well. Namely, threats to reproductive freedom and climate stability—and to Indigenous bodies and lands more comprehensively—are neither new nor separable. These threats have common colonial roots that continue to proliferate. Each is a result of the disruption and destruction of Indigenous kinship assemblages. Indeed, in aiming to remediate their current reckonings, white

progressives routinely (if unthinkingly) support forms of settler state violence that perpetuate reproductive and climate injustice in Indigenous communities.

Under the pretense of emergency response, white progressives have presumed entitlement both to reproductive health services on reservations and to Indigenous lands as wellsprings for renewable energy resources. In both cases, white progressives have construed Indigenous communities as repositories of goods and services to be extracted. Progressive discourses have touched on the unique and disproportionate impacts of reproductive unfreedom and climate instability on Native communities. The ongoing colonial dynamics undergirding these impacts has received far less attention. Reflection by white progressives on their own implication in perpetuating these dynamics has received almost none. By and large, white progressive responses to reproductive and climate injustice thus reinforce and replicate familiar forms of settler state violence the effects of which rebound upon non-Indigenous American communities as well.

With this in mind, we appeal to white progressives—notably including white feminists—to embrace the proposition that their reckonings with reproductive and climate injustice can be neither properly understood nor successfully addressed without prioritizing Indigenous futurity. Moreover, we call for centering forms of Indigenous feminist praxis that facilitate robust Indigenous coalitions of anti-colonial resistance. We offer illustrative examples of such coalitions in the penultimate section of the essay. We begin, though, by clarifying the contours of the reproductive and climatological reckonings that white progressives now face and then turn to making explicit their colonial roots.

## 2. Reproductive Reckonings

Access to legal abortion, though never secure for all U.S. residents capable of becoming pregnant, has now been more widely foreclosed by the 2022 upending of *Roe vs. Wade*'s protection of a federal right to abortion. Prior to the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling, the *Roe* standard held, however tenuously, that the Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process clause in combination with the Ninth Amendment's support for additional unenumerated constitutional rights entailed a right to privacy that included protecting an unrestricted right to abortions performed in the first trimester of pregnancy and a restricted right thereafter. As of July 2024, abortions are fully banned in fourteen states and restricted beyond *Roe*-era limits in another seven. Mortality and morbidity among pregnant people are rising across all demographics in states with bans and additional restrictions. Although negative pregnancy-related health outcomes have long disproportionately affected pregnant people of color, further entrenching racial disparities (Williams et al. 2022; Treder et al. 2023), these outcomes now affect white pregnant people to a greater degree than before *Roe* was overturned. In restrictive states, life-saving healthcare in cases of ectopic pregnancies, for instance, is routinely being denied. Access to medication abortion, often a key resource to pregnant people living in restrictive states, has likewise been threatened (Pauly 2023). The severe social, political, and health-related consequences of this reversal, including a noted rise in pregnancy-related mortality, are undeniable (Frederiksen 2023).

Reproductive activists of color have called for treating the limited right to abortion provided by *Roe* as the floor, rather than the ceiling, of reproductive politics (Littlefield 2023). But the liberal feminist response to *Dobbs* that tends to resonate with white progressives has moved in the opposite direction; the restoration of *Roe*-like abortion rights remains the central demand of mainstream reproductive advocacy organizations like Planned Parenthood and

Reproductive Freedom for All (formerly NARAL Pro-Choice America). Though increasingly an object of critique in scholarly circles—and a longstanding point of contention in activist ones—white feminist-dominated reproductive advocacy in the U.S. has operated within a framework that is explicitly focused on rights and choice, centered on the priorities of able-bodied, white, cisheterosexual women. Indeed, the public face of the reproductive rights movement in the U.S. today can be labelled *white feminist* as a result of both the social positionality of many of its members and also its reflection of a political orientation that actively prioritizes their concerns at the expense of any and all others—a fundamentally exclusionary move that is constitutive of whiteness as an ideological category (Derkas 2017, 276-207).

In this respect, liberal feminists' calls for reproductive choice divert attention from the structural inequities and injustices that make the legal right not just to abortion but also to contraception and reproductive healthcare insufficient or practically irrelevant for many poor, racialized, and disabled pregnant people (Roberts 2015; Ross et al. 2017; Goodwin 2020). By prioritizing threats to white women's reproductive freedom, white feminist reproductive advocacy continues to problematically narrow the scope of reproductive politics, neglecting the range of violations directed against the reproductive agency of racialized and colonized women. In so doing, white feminist advocacy reifies an unstable platform. Though the collapse of that platform has indeed jeopardized white women's reproductive agency, its harshest effects have fallen once again on multiply marginalized people, including Indigenous women.

White feminists' narrowed scope of reproductive politics has proceeded through a failure to acknowledge the eugenicist policies and practices of American law and healthcare that haunt progressivism in the U.S. The colonial roots of these policies and practices, which we discuss in detail below, often go entirely unnoticed. The anxiety over the reversal of *Roe* has only

accentuated white feminism's willful ignorance of the relationship between eugenics, colonialism, and reproduction. That is, white feminists as a group fail to recognize and pointedly neglect that while misogyny in the post-*Dobbs* era may powerfully affect the lives of middle-class white women, they nevertheless retain a relatively protected social status that serves as a shield against certain extreme forms of gendered violence. Their relative protection stems from a racialized and classed hierarchy built into the very concept of womanhood. Following the "cult of true womanhood" emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *true women* were characterized by their gentleness, sensitivity, and chastity—qualities taken to apply only to relatively affluent white women, in opposition to the supposed roughness and promiscuity of women who are poor and/or racialized (Roberts 1997).

This stratification has profoundly affected both social and sexual reproduction in the U.S. The purported noble qualities of white womanhood number among the supposed desirable traits that positive eugenics has sought to promote and proliferate (Dowbiggin 2002; Derkas 2017). *True women* have been strongly encouraged to have children by public information campaigns, tax and social service incentives, and social norms. Such encouragement veers headlong into coercion to reproduce where contraceptives and abortifacients are made unavailable or illegal. The contemporary alt-right movement's prioritization of bearing and raising white children underscores the continuation of positive eugenics in the present (Llanera 2022). In response, the dominant voices in the reproductive rights movement have centered on the right to say *no* or *not now* when confronted with the demand that (white) women reproduce. Such an approach foregrounds personal choice over a collective response to structural injustice. By individualizing the issue, a rights/choice-based framework weakens the feminist stance against eugenicist policies and practices, let alone their colonial prerequisites.

Poor, disabled, and racialized women shunned from the cult of true womanhood have long been seen as bearers of undesirable traits that eugenics should prevent from recurring in the next generation. This negative approach to eugenics focuses on the prevention of childbearing through a range of violent administrative, legal, and medical means: forced sterilization, abortions contingent on consenting to sterilization, forced birth control implantation, forced adoption, severe limitations on public assistance for families living in poverty, and the criminalization of pregnancy (Davis 1981; Collins 1990; Washington 2008; Roberts 2017). All such practices have been widely applied within Indigenous communities across North America (Pegoraro 2015; Clarke 2021). As a result, reproductive advocacy attentive to the range of issues facing pregnant people of color has long had a broader ambit, encompassing the opportunity not just for access to contraception and abortion but to conditions conducive to bearing and raising children in a secure and dignified community of one's own choosing (Roberts 2015; Ross et al. 2017).

By contrast, the drastically narrowed scope of white feminist reproductive advocacy has centered barriers to white women's reproductive agency. Such a focus neglects how, in the heyday of the organized American eugenics movement, white progressives, including Margaret Sanger and members of the American Birth Control League, championed the use of birth control specifically among poor, racialized, and immigrant groups to limit family size (Sanger 2007). Justified as a benevolent effort to help families escape poverty, efforts at distributing contraceptives were nonetheless targeted toward groups whose social and sexual reproduction was deemed undesirable. Between 1929 and 1931, both religious and secular institutions increasingly coalesced around the objective of bearing "fewer and better children" as a basis for social reform (Wilde and Danielsen 2014).

At the same time, those positioned as *true women* lacked either practical or legal access to contraceptives, resulting in an undeniable circumscription of their reproductive freedom as well. The contemporary view of contraceptives as conferring the power of sexual self-determination was therefore limited by their selective and coercive availability and use. All people capable of becoming pregnant thus experienced diminished bodily and reproductive freedom, although in radically different ways. Angela Davis (2003) notes, though, that instead of taking this shared struggle as a point from which to build solidarity and coalition, white progressives largely failed to consider forms of reproductive unfreedom that they did not experience. Nor did they acknowledge—or, today, do they typically acknowledge—forms of reproductive unfreedom that their conceptual forebearers condoned.

As the defense of reproductive freedom emerged in the 1960s, white progressives focused almost exclusively on the legal right to contraception and abortion. The reliance of both *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe* on a right to privacy not explicitly enumerated in the Constitution left the legality of reproductive freedom in the U.S. in a precarious position. Conservative challenges questioning the relevance of privacy to abortion and originalist arguments that privacy is a fabricated right were commonplace between the *Roe* and *Dobbs* rulings (Allen 1994; Araujo 2009). Progressives, too, criticized the reliance of *Roe* on an unenumerated right to privacy, detailing the substantive and strategic benefits that could have been won by arguing on other bases, such as gender equality (Ziegler 2023).

Yet since the *Dobbs* verdict, reproductive advocacy efforts led by white feminists have focused exclusively on the re-establishment of *Roe*. Post-*Dobbs* abortion advocacy has centered on the pursuit of state-level protections of abortion rights in the absence of federal ones, in many cases promoting *Roe*-like statutes that would protect early-term abortions but deny the right to



late-term termination. Liberal feminist advocates supporting these statutes argue that this is the best option currently available to protect or reestablish reproductive freedom, particularly in the face of a highly mobilized anti-abortion movement. Organizations like Planned Parenthood and Reproductive Freedom for All have similarly demurred on the question of viability limits, which they contend should be left to each state's discretion (Littlefield 2023).

By doubling down on the *Roe* standard, white feminists are thus re-entrenching the sordid history of reproductive injustice that produced it in the first place. Woman of Color-led reproductive justice coalitions that for years have foregrounded multifaceted threats to reproductive agency beyond access to contraception and abortion have continued to be overshadowed by white feminist-dominated national organizations. The collapse of *Roe* has left many white feminists experiencing the consequences of restricted reproductive rights for the first time. Focused on the (real, but nonetheless racially charged) objective of rejecting the positive eugenicist urge that white women reproduce, white feminists built a partial and unstable resistance that incurred the worst consequences for the very racialized and colonized people excluded from the platform in the first place.

A marked shift in discourse among white feminists on social media platforms like Twitter (now X) followed the leak of the *Dobbs* decision. Along with collectively grieving and brainstorming solutions to the restriction of reproductive rights, some offered insensitive and ill-informed suggestions under the pretense of an emergency response. Notable among these suggestions is the proposal that white women seek refuge and safe haven on Indian reservations to access abortion services (Hilleary 2022 and Zionts 2022). This idea—rooted in a flawed, colonial understanding of Indigenous sovereignty as a legal void—is both telling and offensive. It marks the first time that abortion access on reservations has received consideration by many of

these advocates, though importantly devoid of concern for Indigenous communities as part of the broader fight for reproductive justice and absent any attention to the complex legal and social dynamics of Indigenous communities regarding abortion access. This white feminist resource grab exemplifies a kind of opportunistic engagement with Indigenous issues that surfaces almost exclusively when it likely is beneficial to non-Indigenous interests.

Still, one notable progressive advocate claims that such activities are not opportunism. At stake here is not ensuring that Indigenous communities offer white pregnant people a helping hand. Opening or expanding clinics on reservations is not even *for* white patients, the advocate maintains. Instead, it is “for the revenue” and to draw more medical professionals to underserved locales (Hilleary 2022). In this respect, white progressives are actually doing Indigenous communities a *favor* by demanding reproductive health services, even if this favor was not requested or even sought. Of course, Indigenous communities are all too familiar with such *favours*. As Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles quips, it is impossible for Indigenous peoples not to recognize but another chapter of “the ongoing narrative that settler colonialism’s salvation and maintenance is found via the use of Indigenous land” (ibid.).

Proposals like that offered by this progressive advocate, and many others like it, represent a clear slap in the face to Indigenous people. They violate a core component of Indigenous sovereignty: the political requisite of respectful intercommunity negotiations and treaty making that establish bases of cross-cultural kinship assemblages (Whyte 2020). Only now, as white women are impacted more broadly by abortion restrictions, has the issue of reproductive health options available to Indigenous women been raised. This is not a coincidence. It is simply the latest iteration of colonialism in a progressive guise.

### 3. Climatological Reckonings

White progressives in the U.S. are likewise increasingly coming to grips with the accelerating effects of climate crisis. In tandem with threats to reproductive freedom, this is the second progressive reckoning. As with the erosion of reproductive freedom, a crisis that racialized and economically marginalized groups have long confronted directly are now reaching privileged demographics.

Primarily attributable to the massive release of carbon dioxide emission from fossil fuels, average global temperatures today are roughly 1° C higher than preindustrial levels (measured from 1880). An additional 0.6° C warming is inevitable due to short-term climatological feedback phenomena such as oceanic thermal inertia. Already, an estimated 600 million people live in regions considered to be climactically unsafe for long-term human habitation. If, as predicted, average global temperatures increase at least 2.4°-2.8° C by century's end, one-third of humanity faces the same fate (Kummu et al. 2021; Lenton et al. 2023). Predictions do not fully account for irreversible threshold effects associated with the loss of Arctic Sea ice and related albedo, drastic depletion of ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, thawing permafrost, and slowing Atlantic meridional overturning circulation, among other macrolevel climactic factors. Not just localized ecologies but the entire ecosphere will be increasingly prone to abrupt, unpredictable disruptions that will exacerbate the sixth global mass extinction event currently underway (Barnofsky et al. 2012).

According to perhaps the most prevalent global narrative, economic actors, particularly in industrialized nations, are quickly depleting the “global carbon budget” (Friedlingstein et al. 2022) marking how much fossil-fuel energy it is deemed safe still to consume. This budget serves as the ultimate baseline among energy policy analysts for determining the juncture at

which time has run out to avert the worst effects of climate change. At the same time, though, analysts worry about a stark “emissions gap” (UNEP 2021) between current global carbon dioxide outputs and the reduction in and sequestration of outputs—perhaps as much as a gigaton (Flannery 2015)—that is required to effectively “mitigate compounding and cascading disasters, from wildfires to floods to uncontrolled migrations, droughts and the spread of more deadly diseases,” states Bryan Williston (2021, 4).

As a result, discussion of climate change among white progressives in the U.S. has increasingly morphed into blaring warnings of an unprecedented climate crisis demanding urgent worldwide action to avert apocalyptic conditions that threaten to limit or perhaps even erase the future of all humankind (Hanman 2019; Wallace-Wells 2020; Atherton 2021; Hartmann 2021). “Nobody will be able to sidestep the issue altogether,” Williston remarks (2021, 66). Even “the wealthiest and most resilient societies” (ibid., 4-5) are at grave risk.

Two strategies for addressing climate crisis have gained traction both in the U.S. and abroad: emergency management and mobilizing for resilience. The focus of proponents of *emergency management* is on protecting a safe climate space within which humans can pursue secure and comfortable lives. Sustainable development, or what now has been rebranded as green industry, has a critical role to play in mitigating future impacts of global heating. Proponents of green industry defend the feasibility of creating sustainable energy and technology infrastructures. Key here is transitioning from a growth economy to a steady-state economy in which profit generation is decoupled from climatologically disruptive and ecologically harmful forms of taking, making, and wasting (Daly 1996). Whereas a growth economy depends on a perpetual quantitative increase in physical throughputs (more taking, more making, and little concern about wasting), a steady-state economy does not expand beyond the capacity of

ecosystems to regenerate resources and reprocess waste. Qualitative improvements in technological efficiency along with the wholesale substitution of nonrenewables for renewables, particularly as energy sources, are the cornerstones of green industry. Investing, in Bill McKibben's words, in a "green Manhattan Project, an ecological New Deal, a clean-tech Apollo mission" (2010, 52) is not just about survival. For many white progressives in the U.S., to be denied green industry is to be refused the opportunity both for a habitable world and for improved living standards among people of communities long exploited by and left behind within an extractive global economy.

Yet if verging on or surpassing irreversible thresholds is all but inevitable at this point, adaptation must be prioritized alongside mitigation. Strategically, this calls for *mobilizing for resilience*, protecting as far as possible the functional integrity of socioecological systems under increasingly harsh environmental conditions (Light 2012; Vogel 2015; Heinberg and Fridley 2016). Mobilizing for resilience requires moving away from an institutionally centralized response to climate crisis and toward local knowledges, notably including Indigenous ecological knowledges (IPCC 2022). Advocates of this approach tend to champion degrowth in favor of green industry. Degrowth involves the pursuit of economic downscaling, or a reversal of the trend toward centralized energy production, globalized networks of consumption, and increased mechanization. Examples include municipalist movements (Bookchin 2005), Transition Towns (Hopkins 2011), and sustainable materialism (Schlosberg and Coles 2016). The reemergence of localization is key as a buffer against economic instability (Jackson 2017). Risk is dispersed among disaggregated and substantially self-sufficient communities. Disruptions within one community are less likely to resonate throughout society. And because localized communities are largely dependent for their survival on local ecosystems, their residents have a vested interest

in ensuring that ecosystem health governs the form their infrastructures take and the day-to-day activities of their members.

Conceptually, though, climate crisis is treated by white American progressives almost exclusively in terms of emerging threats to settlers that long ago were forced on Indigenous peoples (Davis and Todd 2017; Fishel and Wilcox 2017; and Rothe 2020). Even Indigenous ecological knowledge, which has gained increasing attention (UNEP 2021), is viewed as an exploitable resource detachable from Indigenous futurity. Said knowledge is taken to matter just insofar as it is of use by and for non-Indigenous communities (Whyte, Caldwell, and Schaefer 2018).

A similar dynamic is at play with respect to the two prevailing strategies to address climate crisis. For but one example vis-à-vis green industry, the expansion of mining for metals required to produce electric car batteries, solar panels, and wind turbines—including nickel, lithium, cobalt, and copper—is today deemed urgent to achieve the aims of the Green New Deal. Yet fifty-four percent of the 5,097 “transition mineral projects” worldwide are located on or near Indigenous lands (Edmo 2023), which is striking given that Indigenous peoples comprise just five percent of the current global human population. Brian Mason, chairman of the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian reservation in Nevada, indicates that seventy-plus regional lithium mining applications submitted to the federal government are being processed without free, prior, and informed consent by the tribes because they are being fast-tracked to support the Biden administration’s initiative to create a robust domestic supply of electric vehicles (Monet 2023).

The demand for fast-tracking is common across green industry firms. Over and over, appeals to urgency are leveraged to suspend or ignore concerns about climate justice for

Indigenous communities (Howe 2019; Callison 2021; Whyte 2021; Barragan-Contreras 2022). Given that the activities of these firms are actually anything but green, that they typically are just the latest perpetrators of state-supported extractivism (Rees 2023; UNEP 2024), the idea that green industry was ever meant to improve living standards for those long exploited and left behind by the global extractive economy is chimerical (Orange 2022). As discussed below, this proposition also represents a fundamental misunderstanding of, if not outright disregard for, Indigenous considerations of health and wellbeing.

While far less committed to extractivism, white progressive proponents of degrowth betray their own commitment to settler colonialism. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang comment that in seeking to make a new home within Indigenous lands, settlers readily embraced a “homesteading worldview where the wild land and wild people are made for [their] benefit” (2012, 6). Homesteads, and more recently communes, are degrowth’s historical reference points. In the U.S., even if homesteaders and commune residents have sought to create autonomous living conditions at an arm’s length from the state, both rely heavily on settler state violence to purchase and accumulate land—to terraform Indigenous homes into settler property and transmute agents of extended kinship arrangements into exploitable human and natural resources (Million 2021). The pursuit among proponents of degrowth of community self-sufficiency follows this pattern. As Richard Day remarks, their success “once again can only come on the backs of Indigenous peoples” (2010, 268).

Both green industry and degrowth thus reflect colonizing aspects of white progressive “American dreaming” as Kim TallBear (2019) puts it. Participatory democracy as institutionalized in the U.S. itself is born of sustained violence against Indigenous lands and lives and more comprehensively against extended life-affirming and life-enhancing kinship

arrangements (Goeman 2020; Denetdale 2021). Even “in inclusive and multicultural tones,” settler governance “supports the elimination of Indigenous peoples from this place,” TallBear emphasizes (2019, 24). It is an “attack on the relations—both human and other-than-human—that make us who we are” (ibid., 25), particularly insofar as it leaves untroubled settler colonial logics that treat Indigenous lands and lives as objects for subjection (Murdock 2019).

Both green industry and degrowth also keep in place institutions that leave Indigenous communities particularly vulnerable to climate-related dangers. Settlers’ long histories of aggression and irresponsibility—centuries of violations of Indigenous lands and lives—greatly inhibit mitigation and adaptation efforts both within and across these communities. More fundamentally, climate disruptions *are* kinship disruptions, violent disturbances of networks of responsibilities among human and more-than-human relatives. Indeed, it is precisely these networks that have permitted communities to be resilient in the face of ongoing climatological and ecological changes, whether expected and unexpected.

#### 4. Linking Reproductive and Climate Injustice

Reproductive injustice and climate injustice are not separable issues, at least not in the U.S. They are inextricably linked, two outgrowths of ongoing colonialism via the disruption and destruction of Indigenous kinship assemblages. Violent incursion forms the baseline for settler colonial encounters with Indigenous lands and Indigenous bodies. Biopolitically and geopolitically, Indigenous lands and Indigenous bodies function within a logic according to which the energies that support kinship assemblages are something to be owned, manipulated, controlled, and exploited for the benefit of the settler state (Tuck and Yang 2012; Pugliese 2013; Watts 2013; and TallBear 2019). Indigenous peoples, lands, flora, and fauna exist to be accessed



by settlers. Violence is the means by which access is sought. And the specific qualities of relationships that Indigenous women traditionally have supported within many communities have been directly targeted for destruction to facilitate accessibility.

Gendered climate violence is not incidental to settler colonialism but is rather its “abject heart,” Dian Million contends (Million 2013, 177; see also Anderson 2016 and Bourgeois 2018). Colonizers want land and the resources it contains and maintains. Indigenous women’s bodies reproduce forms of political order and agency that historically have resisted divestiture (Stoler 2002; Rifkin 2017; Simpson 2017). The “outsized presence” of women in Indigenous resistance movements is hardly by chance, Million points out. “The insertion of settler-colonial racial-capitalist order is at this intimate level of social reproduction: our ability to reproduce our worlds and literally ourselves. Settler states are established through the violation of Indigenous reproduction; through the decimation of life-sustaining relations” (2021, 394-395). It is no wonder that Indigenous women, notably including climate activists, remain targets for death and disappearance. Physically and symbolically, they are direct obstacles to colonizers’ access (Anderson 2021).

Born of sustained violence against Indigenous lands and lives, democratic institutions in the U.S. continue to normalize and legitimize gendered climate violence. Critically, for current purposes, they perpetuate rigid juridical imaginaries that privilege patrifocal property rights and state-centered citizenship. These imaginaries hinder Indigenous women’s capacities to carry out their kinship-based responsibilities—responsibilities that are necessary for both reproductive and climate justice (Arvin, Ruck, and Morrill 2013; Goeman 2017; Sy 2021). Ample narrative documentation supports the prevalence of matrifocal societies in which women assumed leadership roles within clan systems designed to maintain proper intratribal and intertribal

relations with human and other-than-human kin. Numerous creation stories “speak to a feminine power of creation, and [consider] how this extended metaphorically to capture how women organized and ran their societies,” Kim Anderson states (2016, 206). Indigenous women’s leadership is emergent rather than imposed. It arises from longstanding kinship-centered social and political protocols. Indeed, Indigenous women’s decision making is frequently “highly networked,” Leanne Simpson (2017, 117) adds, and grounded in spiritual powers radiating from their bodies and relationships. These powers serve what Kyle Whyte (2018) calls *collective continuance*, or the societal capacity driven by self-determination to adapt to both expected and unexpected changes in ways that avoid reasonably preventable harms.

While being careful not to incorporate restrictive and paternalistic gender and sex conceptualizations of motherhood and nurturing, women’s essential role in social reproduction as biological and cultural life bearers and life givers is central to collective continuance as well. “In many Indigenous traditions of customary law, women figure as this embodiment of the relations that configure order to the community, the community’s relationship to the earth and to life,” Million remarks (2013, 38). For this reason, Sarah Deer contends, defining and adjudicating crimes against women’s bodies “is the purest form of sovereignty” (2009, 152) for Indigenous communities. The same can be said of crimes against the body of the earth and the kinfolk the earth sustains (Yazzie and Baldy 2018).

By comparison, white progressives in the U.S. tend uncritically to support forms of “humanitarian management” for Indigenous communities that community members themselves understand to be “group death that poses as care” (Million 2021, 393). Progressives routinely fail to appreciate the extent to which reproductive and climate justice are tied to robust place-based networks of relations that are best served by land rematriation, dismantlement of invidious

hetero- and homonormative family structures, and concerted resistance to patriarchal tribal governance structures expressly designed to serve settler interests (Morgensen, 2011; Franke 2015; Denetdale 2017; Harjo 2019).

Million maintains that the ongoing assault on Indigenous women's leadership roles traditionally was intended to reinforce the subordination of white women to white men while also aiming to undermine collective continuance. It also was part of the violent enforcement of gender binaries (Miranda 2010). Coercive sterilizations carried out until only recently on the bodies of Indigenous women not only violated their autonomy but also served as a tool for genocide by limiting the continuation of Indigenous lineages. Negative eugenics projects directed towards Indigenous groups included state policies that outlawed Indigenous midwifery, cutting off Indigenous communities from culturally grounded birthing practices that resonated with their traditions and understanding of health and wellbeing (Clarke 2021; BlackDeer 2023). Federal funding restrictions and the inadequacies of Indian Health Service (IHS) facilities carry this planned neglect of Indigenous reproductive capacities into the present. By prohibiting the use of federal funds for abortion services, the Hyde Amendment severely restricts the reproductive choices available to Native American women reliant on IHS facilities for healthcare. This restriction has only recently become a concern for white progressives in the U.S. with the proposition of reservation clinics serving white women arising as a point of discussion (Zionts 2022).

Compounding barriers to abortion care for Indigenous women is the current state of IHS facilities, which data indicates are typically not equipped to provide abortion services, regardless of what white progressives may hope (Arnold 2014; Collar 2023). As Amanda Collar notes, these barriers are "reflected by the fact that between 1981 and 2001, only 25 abortions were

performed within IHS clinics. This number is staggering when considering that Native American women experience unacceptably high levels of sexual violence compared to their white counterparts, with one study estimating that half of Native American women experience sexual violence at some point in their lifetime” (2023, 408). Such restrictions do more than just limit medical choices; they systematically infringe upon the reproductive freedom of an already marginalized community, raising significant public health and policy concerns.

Demographically, Indigenous women face among the highest rates of rape and sexual abuse worldwide, predominantly perpetrated by white men (Amnesty International 2007; Deer 2015). Linking reproductive injustice to climate injustice, Lily Grisafi emphasizes that “Native American women around the country, and particularly those living near extractive industries, face an epidemic of sexual violence” (2020, 509). It is no coincidence that extractive industries create environments in which Indigenous women are more vulnerable to assault, for there exist “de facto jurisdictional gaps that allow perpetrators to commit crimes on tribal land with impunity” (ibid.). These gaps and accompanying legal ambiguities create substantial loopholes that allow non-Indigenous perpetrators to escape legal consequences when committing sexual violence against Indigenous women—including on tribal lands. The alarming rates of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) symbolizes the systemic devaluation of Indigenous lives and lands. The “Maze of Injustice” report by Amnesty International (2007) details the bureaucratic entanglements and neglect that often leave Indigenous survivors of both sexual violence and land theft and dispossession without justice or closure. This highlights a viciously circular relationship between environmental degradation and the erosion of Indigenous bodily autonomy and lifeways.

Consider as well the generational trauma of boarding schools, which illustrates yet another systemic effort to control Indigenous bodies and lands—and, ultimately, to erase Indigenous futures. As with land theft and dispossession, boarding schools engaged in extraction without consent, directly aiming to subvert collective continuance (Deer 2015; Grisafi 2020). Forcibly removing children from their communities, boarding schools intentionally interrupted the cycle of intergenerational knowledge transmission. The infamous Carlisle Indian School offers a poignant example. Richard Henry Pratt, architect of the Indian education system in the U.S., is notorious for his teaching motto: “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” The genocidal underpinning of Carlisle's intent is crystallized in its chilling anthem, which brazenly declares: “This was the land of our fathers. Centuries long to rove— Must we be alien and homeless. Here on the soil we love? No! for the future beckons out of our old alarms, Out of the tribal fetters, Into the nation’s arms!” (The Indian Helper 1899). Such words were not merely lyrics but a clarion call for forced assimilation and identity erasure. Patrick Wolfe highlights that at Carlisle, the aim was for “the tribe to disappear while its members stayed behind” (2006, 397) to serve as able-bodied workers in settler economies.

Wolfe underscores that the primary objective of the boarding schools was to dismantle Indigenous children's inherent sense of collective identity and their connection to ancestral lands and land-based knowledge systems. They were driven to abandon their Indigenous notions of relationality, kinship, and bond with their families and places, pushing them toward the individualism intrinsic to capitalism. This was carried out not just in the classroom but through forced labor, imprisonment, diverse forms of abuse, spiritual denial, and isolation (Grande 2004; Million 2013). “Outing” programs sent children to serve as farm labor and housekeepers for white families (Grande 2004). The intent was to imprint on them the value of (Western-

construed) industriousness while also forcing them into the lowest rungs of employment and servitude. At the same time, reservations were systematically depopulated, paving the way for further settler exploitation (Wolfe 2006).

The trauma of these events reverberates to this day within Indigenous communities. Assaults on social and sexual reproductive freedom continue to be coupled with living connections with the land (Meissner 2022). For Indigenous communities, the land is seen not just as a physical space or habitat but as a living relative. Relationships with the land are nurtured through rituals, ceremonies, stories, and daily practices that have evolved over millennia. When children are taken from this milieu, it is not just they who suffer. The land too is deprived of future caretakers. The intergenerational bond, where collective knowledge about stewarding the land is passed down, is severed.

This process, too, is a driver of climate change, which Indigenous scholars and activists across North America stress is directly linked to colonialism and its socioeconomic reverberations—including the emergence of the settler-colonial state, capitalism, and industrialism (Agathangelou 2017; Vergès 2017; and Pulido 2018). Indigenous feminists emphasize the centrality for Indigenous communities of richly interweaving networks of responsible agents composing extended more-than-human kinship assemblages based on both care and multigenerational collective knowledge (Watts 2013; TallBear 2018; Styres 2019; Whyte 2021). Framed as such, climate crisis is principally a manifestation of devastating multidimensional relational disruptions of Indigenous lands and lives. As experienced by Indigenous communities today, it is a manifestation of what Kyle Whyte calls “intensified colonialism” (2017, 154; see also Watt-Coultier 2015). It is a rebound effect of centuries of accumulating colonial injustices. Climate crisis is not unprecedented. It is *déjà vu*—the

repetition, if nevertheless accentuated in global scope and scale, of what Indigenous communities long have endured. This includes drastic relocation-based climate disruptions, economic collapse, loss of relatives both human and other-than-human, and cultural disintegration. Indeed, these events are nothing less than the expected outcome of centuries of accumulating colonial injustices (Meissner and Smith 2024).

What white progressives identify as climate crisis today are thus “reverberations” of the “seismic shockwave” resulting from colonial violence unleashed by their own ancestors and continuing to the present day (Davis and Todd 2017, 774). Within a racialized framework, fears of apocalypse signal white dread at facing that which Indigenous communities already routinely experience: dispossession, displacement, compromised security, world collapse. Wittingly or not, these fears likewise conceal that whiteness as a racial designation embodies entitlement to go on pillaging (or to benefit from the pillage of) others’ lives and lands. Willful negligence or ignorance of this dynamic, including among white progressives in the U.S., is itself a manifestation of colonial unknowing and cultural dysphoria (Yunkaporta 2020) that promotes obliviousness to Indigenous worlds and to structures that sometimes subtly but always substantively privilege settlers’ lives and lifeways.

## 5. Illustrating the Link: The Indian Child Welfare Act

The recent assault on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) is further evidence of the common colonial roots of reproductive and climate injustice. Established in 1978, ICWA was intended to preserve Indigenous cultural heritage by prioritizing the placement of Native children within Indigenous families and communities, hereby maintaining their spiritual and ancestral bonds (Fort and Smith 2023). While ICWA might outwardly appear as a straightforward child

welfare legislation, its implications are profound and are closely tied to colonial and corporate interests (Fort and Smith 2023; Tidwell 2023).

ICWA emerged as crucial legislation to confront and counteract the ongoing genocidal tactics aimed at Indigenous communities in the U.S. The Geneva Convention includes as a form of genocide “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (International Committee of the Red Cross 1949). The historical context surrounding the adoption and foster care practices concerning Indigenous children in the U.S. fits the bill. By the mid-20th century, state child welfare systems systematically targeted Indigenous families, leading to the displacement of vast numbers of Indigenous children. The figures are staggering: twenty-five to thirty-five percent of all Indigenous children were removed from their homes, with roughly eighty-five percent placed outside their communities, often with white families (Tidwell 2023). This dynamic continued the erosion of the familial and cultural fabric of Indigenous communities while also, on an individual level, disconnecting Indigenous children from their land-based heritages and cultural roots.

The passage of ICWA was intended to protect Indigenous children from arbitrary removal from their families. Provisions of the law range from ensuring active involvement of children’s tribes in legal proceedings to emphasizing kinship and cultural preservation. Such practices focus on the holistic wellbeing of children, as well as their families and communities, recognizing the profound psychological and emotional benefits of connectedness to culture, kin, and land (ibid.).

The 2023 Supreme Court challenge to ICWA underscores the intricate, and often concealed, entanglement of extractivist economic concerns in juridical battles relevant to Indigenous futurity. In the run-up to the ruling, Chase Iron Eyes, co-director and lead counsel of



the Lakota People’s Law Project, stated that “Overturning ICWA could be the first legal domino in a broader attack on tribal rights and sovereignty. It is no accident that the plaintiffs are represented by Gibson Dunn.... For these attorneys, this case isn’t so much about Native children, as it is about nationally sanctioned genocide of Native people” (Harper and Phelps 2021). Notably, Gibson Dunn also represents Chevron, Shell, Energy Transfer Partners (builders of the Dakota Access Pipeline), and Enbridge (builders of the Line 3 Pipeline).

What might the various parties Gibson Dunn represents stand to gain by challenging ICWA? Look no further than resource-rich Indigenous territories. Recall Grisafi’s contention that “sexual assault and land theft are deeply intertwined in a colonial context.” Gibson Dunn’s clients follow a long legacy of treating Indigenous lands as untapped reservoirs of wealth. But unified, resilient Indigenous communities stand in their way. By challenging ICWA, these parties foresaw the prospect of fracturing these communities from within, hence reducing the potency of their resistance to incursions. The battle over the legal status of ICWA is thus part a larger historical struggle against colonial attacks on Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous sexual and social reproduction.

The 7-2 Supreme Court decision in favor of ICWA is monumental, marking a significant victory in the ongoing struggle against such attacks. However, the shadow of colonial ambitions persists, challenging Indigenous communities to continually adapt resistance strategies (Ruíz 2024). This resilience and enduring spirit of resistance are not just about defense; they also embody proactive strategies aimed at resurgence.

## 6. Indigenous Feminist Praxis and Prioritizing Indigenous Futurity

This brings us to the crucial role of Indigenous feminist praxis and the prioritization of Indigenous futurity. Indigenous feminist praxis represents a fundamental departure from prevailing U.S. policies that often prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term ecological health, wellbeing, and social equity. It embodies a holistic approach that recognizes the inextricable links between environmental responsibility and social justice. This praxis challenges the compartmentalization of these issues, advocating instead for a comprehensive understanding of how climactic instability, ecological degradation, reproductive freedom, community health, and cultural resilience are co-implicated. And unlike progressive approaches to reproductive and climate justice that often marginalize Indigenous voices, Indigenous feminist praxis centers these perspectives, offering solutions that are both culturally resonant and environmentally sound.

Beyond defending against assaults on Indigenous lives and lands is the pressing need to actively shape a future that centers Indigenous perspectives and values. This involves not only combating existing colonial institutions but also proactively forging anti-colonial pathways. The commitment to reproductive and climate justice is greatly enhanced by foregrounding and supporting the work of Indigenous coalitions engaged in resurgence. Here are several notable examples.

### *Indigenous Women Rising*

Indigenous Women Rising (IWR), initiated by Rachael Lorenzo in 2014, intertwines reproductive health, decolonization, and land stewardship. Originally sparked by IHS's denial of emergency contraception to Indigenous victims of sexual assault, Lorenzo has since expanded her commitment to healthcare equity more broadly. IWR augments existing abortion support in Indigenous communities with holistic reproductive care, covering midwifery, doula assistance,

and essential birthing supplies. Ultimately, Lorenzo seeks to support access to a comprehensive spectrum of reproductive choices in the Indigenous communities IWR serves. Beyond routine healthcare, this involves helping to empower community members to give voice to self-determined and land-centered reproductive narratives that support the alleviation of deep scars left by invidious forms of reproductive unfreedom mandated by the settle state. IWR communications and media director Jennifer Lim notes that these measures help community members to reclaim a core connection between social and sexual reproductive justice (Dunlap 2023).

### *Toronto Birth Centre*

The Toronto Birth Centre (TBC) offers a lens through which Indigenous kinship-centered environmental perspectives fuse seamlessly with healthcare. TBC aspires to be a “space where pregnant people, families, and communities can access culturally safe birthing care” (Toronto Birthing Center n.d.). The organization’s mission is anchored in *Itapisinowin*—a Cree term that underscores a pluralistic, coalitional approach to Indigenous activism. TBC offers healthcare in a manner that acknowledges the “interconnectedness and interdependencies of all of creation.” By foregrounding “respect for the sacredness of all life” and emphasizing “harmony and balance with the natural world and the universe,” TBC acknowledges the deep link between social and sexual reproduction. TBC’s commitment to “nurturing healthy and reciprocal partnerships” and upholding the “maintenance of cultural integrity” accentuate the pivotal role of resurgence in facilitating individual and community health (ibid.). The land is not just a backdrop but an active participant in resurgence, underlining the symbiotic relationship between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral territories.

### *Tewa Women United*

Tewa Women United (TWU) “is a Native American women-centered, -founded, and -run organization,” notes executive director Corrine Sanchez (2016, 49). The organization originally came into being to resist the nuclear weapons industry within the original boundaries of the Tewa homeland in northern New Mexico, including uranium mining and nuclear waste storage on tribal lands and the research and development of nuclear warheads on unceded federal land. But for Sanchez, environmental degradation is a matter of reproductive justice in its own right. The organization, she states, “views women as a reflection and embodiment of Nung Ochuu Quiyo, Mother Earth. For us, our reproductive health is connected to the health of Mother Earth. It is at this intersection that our environmental justice (EJ) work is braided and intimately linked to our reproductive justice (RJ) work” (ibid.).

Philosophically, the concept of *opide* guides TWU’s work. *Opide* is an intersectional social justice framework that defines the pursuit of reproductive freedom not simply in terms of strengthening individual rights but, more comprehensively, as being part of a kinship network of mutual care and accountability. Healthy social and sexual reproduction requires addressing intergenerational trauma and healing aimed at protecting the most vulnerable—from future generations to Nung Ochuu Quiyo herself to food-related kin (ibid., 52). For the last of these, Tewa women and girls are implementing culturally responsive programs to reconnect with their sustainable agricultural heritage as a way both to encourage healthy eating and to remediate persistent soil and water pollution. This connects with the idea that birthing itself—of children and of food—is ecological.

## 7. Conclusion

Katsi Cook, Mohawk midwife and environmental researcher powerfully drives home the ecological basis of social and sexual reproduction as well as the deep connection between climate justice (and environmental justice more generally) and reproductive justice:

We know from our traditional teachings that the waters of the earth and the waters of our bodies are the same water. The follicular fluid which bathes the ripening ovum on the ovary; the dew of the morning grass; the waters of the streams and the rivers and the currents of the oceans—all these waters respond to the pull of our Grandmother Moon. She calls them to rise and fall in her rhythm. Mother's milk forms from the bloodstream of the woman. The waters of our bloodstream and the waters of the earth are all the same water. (2003, 1)

These considerations are not metaphorical for Cook, nor for any of the Indigenous organizations here discussed. The reclamation of women-centered forms of storytelling and meaning making are central to Indigenous resurgence. Their power is in reshaping conceptual frameworks—how we see the world and ourselves in it, along with what we then do with respect to what we see.

Supporting Indigenous futurity depends on acknowledging that reproductive and climate justice share a common colonial root. It depends on recognizing that the health and wellbeing of the planet is directly linked to the health and wellbeing of its people—both human and other-than-human. This perspective sees the earth not merely as a resource to be exploited but as a living entity that sustains all forms of life. This approach starkly contrasts with the often short-sighted and exploitative strategies prevalent in mainstream Western policies, even progressive ones.

Sanchez notes that the appeal of Indigenous feminist-centered EJ/RJ movements start with everyday experiences of Indigenous women that are also relatable for poor people and people of color across the U.S. To the extent that these experiences are of concern to white feminists and white environmental activists—at least when they talk the talk with respect to embracing anti-colonial activism—perhaps they offer a foothold for seeing their own reckonings anew, as vestiges of colonial structures that entrap us all. Maybe in genuine coalition with Indigenous-led women-centered initiatives white progressives can more readily walk the walk as well.

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