June 28, 201 By [Harsha Walia](http://thefeministwire.com/author/hwalia/)

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Every morning this week I have woken up to my email inbox and social media feed filled with inspiring stories and images of resistance as part of the Idle No More and Defenders of the Land call for Sovereignty Summer. [Sovereignty Summer](http://www.idlenomore.ca/) is “a campaign of coordinated non-violent direct actions to promote Indigenous rights and environmental protection in alliance with non-Indigenous supporters.”

Colonialism in North America has been designed to ensure the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples from their territories, the destruction of autonomy and self-determination within Indigenous governance, and the attempted assimilation of Indigenous cultures and traditions. This has been justified through racist civilizing discourses, such as the discovery doctrine and *terra nullius*, whichuphold the political and legal right for colonial powers to conquer supposedly barren Indigenous lands.

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Colonialism continues today in many forms. In particular, resource extractive development projects, including mining, forestry, and oil and gas development, are devastating Indigenous lands and communities without governments or corporations obtaining free, prior and informed consent from impacted communities. Given Canada’s current push towards a petro-state, it comes as no surprise that Indigenous opposition has been most vocal to the tar sands boom in Alberta and to oil and gas pipelines from coast to coast.

At the helm of this opposition to industrial genocide are a number of Indigenous women.

Crystal Lameman is a member of the Beaver Lake Cree nation, leading the struggle to prevent expansion of the tar sands. The Beaker Lake Cree have launched a significant legal action arguing that tar sands projects and big oil are violating their treaty rights to meaningful access their traditional hunting grounds and fishing waters. They are [taking the government to court](http://raventrust.com/) for no less than 17,000 treaty violations.

[As Crystal says](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kds5cLuEr_4), “We have every major oil company on our territory. None of them was given permission by our nation to be there… In less than 20 years an area the size of England has been completely destroyed and there are further plans to develop that ten times. This territory that is being conquered is our traditional hunting territories, the land that we subside on, the land in which we live… It is my obligation as a mother, my obligation to my ancestors to ensure we have our rights respected. It’s my obligation to my future generations and most of all to our own true mother, Mother Earth.”

Another young Indigenous mother who has traveled the world speaking out against the tar sands is Eriel Tchekwie Deranger. Eriel is Dene from the [Athbasca Chipewyan First Nation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE92JEg4JEU&feature=player_embedded) (ACFN), who are right in the heart of this mega industrial project. Last year, ACFN launched a legal challenge against notorious oil giant Shell. Eriel does not mince her words; she is explicit that what is happening in her community is genocide and that her community and its traditional way of life are dying. [As she poignantly and painfully describes](http://www.vancouverobserver.com/environment/athabasca-chipewyan-spokeswoman-calls-tar-sands-expansion-policies-cultural-genocide), “I’m still eating the fish, because I don’t want the tar sands to change who I am. But I still get these moments of panic after, because I don’t know what toxins are in the fish and going into my body — nobody knows.”

[Eriel also notes the significance of Indigenous women taking the lead in this struggle](http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/david-p-ball/2012/09/our-voices-are-marginalized-indigenous-women-speak-out-against-t), “Women are very impacted, not just by tar sands, but through the very extension of colonization of this continent and this country, women lost their rights; women lost their identities, and patriarchy was forced upon our people… When the earth is being damaged, hurt and destroyed through industrial development, that feminine entity is being hurt. The women feel it.”

For the past four years, Eriel has been organizing a Tar Sands Healing Walk, which brings together hundreds of people to walk together in a spiritual gathering to protect culture, environment and climate from the reckless expansion of the tar sands. This year, the [Healing Walk](http://www.healingwalk.org/) is taking place from July 5-6th and has drawn notable support from across Canada and the US. One of Eriel’s co-organizers for the Healing Walk is [Melina Laboucan-Massimo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz3nSscXamI), a Lubicon Cree environmental activist. Over 1400 square kilometers of leases have been granted for tar sands development on Lubicon lands, and almost 70% of Lubicon territory has been leased for future development.

Such economic development not only destroys the land and sustenance for Indigenous communities, but also creates massive inequity and impoverishment. Deliberate impoverishment is a key structuring of colonialism, creating cycles of desperation and destitution. [In the case of Melina’s community, for example, she explains](http://nobelwomensinitiative.org/2012/10/meet-melina-laboucan-massimo-indigenous-environmental-activist/), “Since 1978, over 14 billion dollars have been taken out of our traditional territory. Yet my family still goes without running water.”

A network of oil and gas pipelines including Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline, Kinder Morgan pipeline, Pacific Trails Pipeline, Ontario Line 9 reversal, TransCanada West-East Pipeline, and the Keystone XL pipeline also threaten Indigenous communities. The past few years has seen widespread resistance to many of these projects, and in many cases effectively stalling them as in the case of Keystone XL and Enbridge Northern Gateway. Over 100 Indigenous First Nations have signed the [Save the Fraser Declaration](http://savethefraser.ca/). This sovereign Indigenous law bans Enbridge pipeline, tankers and other tar Sands projects from their lands, territories and watersheds.

Most recently, an Enbridge terminal in Southern Ontario was occupied from June 20-26, 2013. Line 9 pipeline would carry toxic bitumen from the Alberta Tar Sands through approximately 14 Indigenous communities and over 100 towns in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. “We have to protect the land – this isn’t just a side project for us, we have to protect our future. It’s our responsibility,” [says Missy Elliot of Six Nations of the Grand River, whose territory the pipelines crosses through](http://swampline9.tumblr.com/about). The Swamp Line 9 occupation resulted in dozens of arrests but resisters vowed to keep up the pressure against environmental racism and colonialism.

One of the most inspiring direct actions against pipelines is the [Unist’ot’en Camp](http://unistotencamp.com/). This ongoing land reclamation in the province of BC has resulted in traditional log cabins being built and inhabited in the direct pathway of approximately ten proposed pipeline projects. Over the past three years the Unist’ot’en have escorted drillers right off their territories. This year, they are hosting their fourth annual action camp from July 10-14, 2013. Freda Huson is a host of the action camp and spokesperson of the Unist’ot’en clan. [Freda describes matriarchal and matrilineal governance in her nation](http://rabble.ca/news/2013/02/indigenous-sovereigntists-speak), “The true traditional decision-making is carried through the clans and through the women who carry the clans. This is unceded Indigenous lands and we will not permit any pipelines through our territory.”

**Indigenous Feminisms – Land is Life**

It is no coincidence that Indigenous women, who are most impacted by the interlinked systems of colonialism, criminalization, environmental degradation, poverty, inequality, and family separation, have been at the forefront of movements to affirm Indigenous nationhood, exercise personal and collective sovereignty, end sexual violence, grow healthy communities, and restore relations to the land. As [Bonnie Clairmont, Bear Clan of the HoChunk nation has previously told me](http://rabble.ca/news/2012/12/debunking-blatchford-and-other-anti-native-ideologues-idle-no-more), “I’m reminded of how Indian women are strong because we protect our treaty rights, grandmother earth, resources, our children and our people.”

The mainstream feminist movement’s fixation with gender equality and a liberal discourse focused on individual choice (and often, consumption) has marginalized a more systemic feminist framework rooted in a paradigm of land, community, intersectionality, and responsibility. This marginalization is not unintentional; it has in part been legitimized through a Eurocentric feminist discourse that perpetuates the global imperialist myth that certain cultural identities and traditions are either apathetic or antithetical to women’s rights.

Yet Indigenous women unapologetically articulate how community autonomy and self-determination is intrinsic to gender justice struggles. [Anishinaabekwe activist Winona LaDuke writes](http://www.urbanhabitat.org/book/export/html/951), “Most indigenous women understand that our struggle as women is integrally related to the struggle of our nations for control of our land, resources, and destinies… It is not about civil rights for us. It is not about equal access to something. It is about ‘Get off my neck.’”

Indigenous feminist Andrea Smith, in her seminal book, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, outlines how sexual violence against Indigenous women has been a founding pillar of colonialism. Her book, a thorough historical examination, reveals how the rape-ability of Indigenous lands has been connected to the rape-ability of Indigenous women; they are both forms of violent domination and extraction without consent where “needs of the taker are paramount.” [Smith summarizes](http://www.southendpress.org/2005/items/Conquest/Excerpt): “gender violence is not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but also serves as a tool of racism and colonialism. That is, colonial relationships are themselves gendered and sexualized.”

Colonial gendered violence against Indigenous women continues today – from the crisis of missing and murdered women in almost every urban and rural community to the displacement of Indigenous women from their lands by corporate resource extraction projects as well as federal Indian Act policies. Every February 14th for the past twenty two years, women’s memorial marches take place to honor women who have been gone missing or been murdered. [Audrey Huntley, of No More Silence in Toronto, describes these marches as an act of sovereignty](http://www.bwss.org/2013/02/february-14th-in-toronto-%E2%80%93-ceremony-as-an-act-of-sovereignty/): “[We] practice ceremony in honoring our missing sisters both as an act of love for those who are gone and those who remain behind to mourn as well as an assertion of sovereignty… [S]ettler violence against

as an assertion of sovereignty… [S]ettler violence against Indigenous women is inherent to ongoing colonization and land theft. Indigenous women who are at the centre of our communities have always presented an obstacle to the colonial project.”

**Decolonization**

With Canada Day (July 1) and US Independence Day (July 4) creeping up with their customary erasure of settler-colonialism, we all need to renew our commitment to fighting colonization.  In addition, decolonization of settler-colonialism also necessitates a resurgence and recentering of Indigenous worldviews of another way of living and stewarding the land.

In particular, decolonizing our views of the natural world would bring us closer to Indigenous worldviews. Taking only what we need from the land and sharing it, understanding that humans are not superior to other species but are just one part of the natural world, and fostering a consciousness of the earth as a lifesource to be protected and not private property to be exploited and traded on the market are all critical to decolonization. Such teachings defy the capitalist and colonial system’s logic of competition, commodification and domination, and instead, generate interdependency and respect among all living things.

Decolonization also calls on us to affirm community. One of the contradictions of capitalism and colonialism is that while we are increasingly dependent on global production processes for our basic clothing and food, we are increasingly isolated from one another. The strength of our relations is, therefore, subversive to the logic of alienation within capitalism and colonialism. [Black-Cherokee activist Zainab Amadahy uses a relationship framework to describe the process of decolonization](http://rabble.ca/news/2010/07/community-%E2%80%98relationship-framework%E2%80%99-and-implications-activism): “Understanding the world through a Relationship Framework … we see our roles and responsibilities to each other as inherent to enjoying our life experiences.” [Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox similarly writes](http://decolonization.wordpress.com/2012/12/28/indigenous-sovereignty-and-human-rights-idle-no-more-as-decolonizing/)*,* “Relationship creates accountability and responsibility for sustained supportive action.” Decolonization encourages us to think of this interconnectedness as we strengthen alliances and enact solidarities to dismantle colonial structures and ideologies.

Decolonization’s most transformative potential thus rests in a vision that is far more than the politics of inclusion, and is something fundamentally different from equal opportunity within state structures or in the performance of wage-labor. Such a vision brings in ancestral resilience and frees us from a colonial and hierarchical relationship of domination, frees us from a dehumanizing and isolating social organization that robs us from one another, and frees us from a capitalist economy that destroys the land and our collective future. The Two Row Wampum, for example, is a living agreement of peace, friendship, and respect between the Indigenous Haudenosaunee and settlers and is premised on the revolutionary notion of respectful coexistence and land stewardship. Decolonization is as much a process as a goal; the journey of how we get there is as critical as the destination we reach. This must be a process grounded in humility and acts of responsibility as we constitute kinships based on respect to Indigenous nations, to one another as self-determining individuals and communities, and to the land that sustains us all.

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