



**Zoltán Grossman**, *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780295741529 (paper); ISBN: 9780295741512 (cloth)

Zoltán Grossman's *Unlikely Alliances* is a deep, richly researched, intensely staked, and clearly argued book that brings into political relief millions of acres of Indigenous lands in the United States that have been shaped through the production and protection of Native/non-Native alliances. Situating himself in the struggle, Grossman reflects on how the anti-colonial movement for Indigenous self-determination is his movement, too, sharpening a theme that cuts through the book on the responsibility of non-Natives to disrupt the Western order that *captures us all* in a violent colonial holding pattern. He deftly weaves in the thought of key critics of the settler state and the brilliance of critical Indigenous thought to make grounded sense of their contributions through his own organizing experience and scholarly research. His investment in the struggle is described in a personal introduction that traces his own family's narrow escape from genocide. But it is also attested to in a moving foreword by the indomitable Anishinaabe leader and thinker Winona LaDuke who calls this book "a prayer, a thanksgiving, and a teaching tool" (p.x).

The book covers a broad and complex range of alliances that were formed over the past 50 years between Indigenous nations and non-Native neighbors and allies in states mostly concentrated along the northern borderlands of the country from the Pacific Northwest, to the Great Basin and Northern Plains, and the Great Lakes region. These struggles raise for Grossman important questions about how place-based conflict is best approached to build the strongest forms of solidarity: must they be "bottom-up" or grassroots, or can they be "top-down", or a combination of the two? Pushing this question further, *Unlikely Alliances* asks: "If a common 'sense of place' can be constructed by an alliance, at what scale is it most effective?" (p.36). In other words, what is the site of power to target in order to effect meaningful forms of decolonization? Is changing things *in place* sufficient? When do federal and state agencies hold

the cards, precluding the power of regional blocs and town-reserve coalitions to enact long-term structural change?

By attending to questions of scale, power, and place, Grossman builds on important theorizations of “concurrent” sovereignties. Drawing on Kevin Bruyneel’s (2007) concept of a “third space of sovereignty”, he writes: “I hope that some of these lessons not only can be applied to other Native/non-Native environmental alliances but also can open some new directions for rethinking relations between ethnic/racial/national groups in general, even outside an environmental or North American context” (p.27). This is where Grossman’s methodology really shines because his grounded approach allows him to discern strategic insights about *operationalizing* concurrent sovereignties as a product of alliance, revealing a shared space between groups.

Further, the Indigenous political orders that prefigure these alliances foreground a radical imaginary of space: “Indigenous nations stake their cultural survival not on state citizenship but on boundaries and institutions that protect their distinctive identities and sovereign nationhood”, he writes. This opens a space to “build common identities *outside* the state-constricted framework, by constructing or using common territorial identities and a ‘sense of place’” (p.15). Remapping space is necessary to remap sovereignty and to generate new forms of political authority. Here the crucial word “unlikely” in the book’s title comes into play: despite complicated histories, conflicts, and racial antagonisms, decolonization cannot just be ideas to hold, but must *take place*. Hence the importance of a book that examines the variegated formations of these alliances across a vast terrain.

Following an introduction, *Unlikely Alliances* covers “fish wars” in western Washington (Chapter 1); hydroelectric struggles in the Plateau region of eastern Washington, Oregon and Idaho (Chapter 2); the anti-military activism in Nevada that involved the Western Shoshone and in southern Wisconsin that involved the Ho-Chunk Nation (Chapter 3); the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne beginning the work forming alliances with ranchers and farmers against mining on the northern plains that would set the ground for relationships two decades later, the “cowboy-Indian alliances” against fossil fuel extraction (Chapter 4); and the links between movements in the



Pacific Northwest against shipping the oil and coal extracted (Chapter 5). Finally, the book documents the struggle of the Ojibwe in northern Wisconsin to align with neighbors against metallic mines that endangered the fisheries (Chapters 6 and 7).

Since this review cannot canvass all of these rich examples of Native/non-Native alliance provided, the struggles that take place on Ho-Chunk lands in Wisconsin can stand in as representative of the kinds of deep ethical, political, and strategic problems addressed by this book. Here Grossman has numerous opportunities in the history of these particular struggles to reflect on fractures *within* alliances that formed around opposition to military projects and reclaiming former military and dam sites. For example, he shows that while the spatial component of forging alliances is crucial in reimagining space, companies or governments can also strategically deploy spatial realignments to engineer favorable outcomes for white allies to the detriment of Indigenous opponents. This is the ultimate test for the strength of the alliance. As Grossman writes, the “key test of any cross-cultural movement is when the more advantaged group has its primary demands met but the demands of the less-advantaged members have not yet been met” (p.130). He also shows how Indigenous land reclamation – when linked to broader economic and political struggles – can secure lasting alliance through co-management regimes over sensitive areas, but how this depends greatly on tribal resources to mobilize the legal expertise necessary to push for meaningful change in the territorial authority of a place.

If they share one thing in common, all of the book’s examples shed light on the incredible skillfulness of Indigenous negotiators who recognize the need to share the land, but never at the cost of their responsibilities. *Unlikely Alliances* valorizes the knowledge of practitioners within these alliances, respecting the incredible labor, love, and intelligence that goes into such organizing. These stories all prickle with the energy of treaties, as well, attesting to the vitality of sacred agreements that govern land and relations on the territories described, even when ignored – they lie like blueprints buried in the soil.

Perhaps it’s best to leave on this important question that Grossman poses: “If Native peoples strongly assert their nationhood, will their alliances with their non-Indian neighbors be weaker or stronger?” (p.15). This is perhaps the key stake in the focus on alliance: gauging its



instrumentality to white benefit and long-term gain versus the real territorial authority and jurisdiction Indigenous nations seek to reclaim. The answer seems to lie in the journey, as Grossman beautifully describes here.

## Reference

Bruyneel K (2007) *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

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