

Power Back: Native Nations Projecting Authority Back into Stolen Lands

The “Land Back” movement is as old as the original Indigenous resistance to colonial land theft, but began to be named only in the past decade. While media and government tend to limit its scope to the return of land to direct Native jurisdiction or ownership, Indigenous movements such as the NDN Collective describe it as a metanarrative to defend, develop, and decolonize Native nations.

Rolling back colonial dispossession through ownership is certainly the strongest method for tribes to protect their land. Some tribes have reacquired small patches of stolen lands in their original territories, putting purchased fee lands into federal trust status, or convincing a few landowners or companies to sign over property or put it into a land trust. Tribal governments often find that this strategy runs up against private property rights, as Meredith Alberta Palmer observes, based on doctrines of Native inferiority and the “non-Indian character” of the majority.

The priorities of Native nations have never stopped at the reservation border. As Imre Sutton’s maps described, they can encompass their ancestral lands in a range of intersecting perspectives:

a culturally based ethnohistorical view,

a politically based view of government jurisdictions,

and an economically based proprietary view. Limiting Land Back exclusively to this realm of capitalist property ownership can sideline the assertion of cultural and political powers.

Though some tribes have reacquired acreage on some public lands, #LandBack often runs up against the brick wall of government intransigence, particularly over larger federal lands, such as the 1980s attempts for the return of the sacred Black Hills to the Lakota.

The BIA generally permits tribes to put new lands into federal trust for economic development, but not as often for environmental or sacred site protection.

The Department of Defense has at times tried to return contaminated lands to Native nations, potentially burdening them with clean-up costs, such as when military bases have closed in Alaska or a munitions plant in Wisconsin. In such circumstances, they can get land back without meaningful power over it.

Power Back Some sovereign nations are working on a parallel approach, of projecting their powers outside their reservations into their original homelands to heal the damage inflicted by settler colonialism, particularly in collaborative projects to restore habitat. Since this process has not been as widely recognized or named, I’ve been calling it “Power Back.”

The priority of Native nations and movements is and always will be for #LandBack. But at the same time, they can gain “Power Back” even before regaining direct property ownership, by shifting realities on the ground in their ancestral homelands, developing alliances with settler communities whose futures are better served by respecting tribal authority, and building community resilience to face crises inflicted by colonial capitalism.

In this way, #PowerBack is a necessary corollary to #LandBack. Tribes understand they need to flex their treaty and sovereign rights in order to protect and restore their ancestral homelands, or there will be little healthy land and water left to eventually return to them. Land restitution is about land ownership, but also “the redistribution of power back to Indigenous communities.”

“Land Back is really about the decision-making power...that should include some access to the territories and resources in a more equitable fashion.”

Allyship can help “shift the decision-making power that has been wrongfully taken ... therefore restoring power back to our nations.”

Studying the current actions of Pacific Northwest tribes provides a window into strategies for both #LandBack and #PowerBack. Washington Tribal Water Principles pledged to “use our sovereign governmental powers...to protect, restore, and enhance these resources for future generations.”

Many tribal governments have used the “Treatment as State” provisions of the federal Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act to regulate off-reservation pollution sources that affect reservations.

Even tribes lacking treaty rights have creatively projected their authority into their ancestral lands, as in the case of a Colville Tribes lawsuit successfully shutting down a polluting smelter across the border in Canada.

Pacific Northwest Treaty Rights. In the Pacific Northwest, Native nations are starting to reindigenize their original homelands, which often correspond to watersheds. As the Nisqually treaty rights leader Billy Frank, Jr. stated, “We know our watersheds, we know our neighbors and for centuries, we’ve known the needs of salmon. This is our homeland. This is where we live. We aren’t going anywhere.”

In Pacific Northwest treaties of 1854-55, tribal nations ceded 64 million acres of their homelands, in return for tiny reservations and continued access to their hunting, fishing, and gathering grounds. Settler logging and erosion harmed forests and estuaries.

Farmers installed culverts, destroyed beaver dams, and erected dikes. Hydroelectric dams blocked fish runs, raised water temps, and concentrated toxins.

In the ‘60s, Native fishers held “fish-ins,” attacked by state wardens and white fishermen. The pivotal 1974 Boldt Decision reaffirmed treaty rights. “White backlash” groups portrayed tribal fishing as the main culprit in declining fish runs, but lost in the Supreme Court.

In the 1989 Centennial Accord, Washington treaty tribes and the State instituted co-management of off-reservation fisheries, and began to protect and restore fish habitat, backed even by some settler fishing groups.

Watershed restoration In the Nisqually watershed, the Nisqually Tribe is now recognized as the “lead entity” in creating watershed stewardship plans for local, state, and federal agencies, together putting three-quarters of the mainstem in protected ownership, even within a military base. In the western section of the Nisqually Delta, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service pulled dikes out of the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge (now renamed after Billy Frank Jr.), in collaboration with the Tribe.

The Tribe acquired the eastern section of the Delta from a white farmer (who sold the land upon his 2006 death), pulled out dikes to allow tides to again flow over the former cattle pasture, and turned his land into a cultural center, in a perfect illustration of land back.

The Nisqually Delta is healing. Tidal flows are again allowed to bring salt water and aquatic species into old restored channels, like blood circulating back into blocked veins and capillaries in a human body. Interstate-5 will soon be raised to make room for intensifying floods.

After decades of being straightened to drain wetlands, upstream tributaries of the Nisqually are being remeandered, and log jams are being installed to create pools for migrating salmon to rest. The ecosystems may not fully revert to their precolonial state, but can be regenerated by “negating the negation” of settler colonialism.

Salmon are returning, because their habitat is being restored through tribal alliances with non-Native residents and agencies. Decades of work remains to be done, given the precarious state of the watersheds, as tribes face a constant struggle to hold state and federal agencies to account.

Removing Barriers Tribal nations are also providing models of restoration. The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe drove the successful removal of two dams on the Elwha River in the 2010s, allowing salmon and shellfish to return to areas where they had been denied for a century.

The Elwha success inspired dam removals on other Washington rivers, and the recent removal of four dams on the Klamath River in Oregon and California.

giving impetus to breach four Lower Snake River dams to restore salmon and orca populations.

Treaty rights are forcing the State of Washington to finally repair or replace harmful culverts that block fish passage under roads.

Our Evergreen students have documented this removal of barriers that were made possible by tribal leadership.

Indigenous climate resilience The climate crisis has brought ocean acidification, sudden spring snowpack melts, and summer droughts and wildfires. Using the template of habitat restoration and dam removals, Northwest tribes are working on climate resilience with local governments that have often opposed tribal sovereignty.

The Tulalip Tribes are bringing back beaver dams to rehydrate upper watersheds, to prevent spring floods by storing snowpack runoff for release during summer low flows.

The Swinomish Tribe developed a climate change adaptation plan with local governments. The Tulalip Tribes defused a conflict between dairy farmers and tribal fishers over cattle waste in salmon streams by converting the waste into biogas energy. Instead of waiting for Congress or the U.N. to act, tribes are stitching together a patchwork of local, watershed-based solutions, to form a quilt of climate resilience.

Several coastal tribes (such as Quinault and Quileute) face increasing flooding, storm surges, and sea-level rise, worsening the threat of tsunamis, so are moving infrastructure to higher ground. Indigenous nations are becoming leaders in disaster resilience, drawing on a strong sense of community to model to nontribal neighbors how to meet catastrophes.

Climate justice work extends to fossil fuel resistance. Coastal tribes such as Lummi and Quinault have led unlikely alliances with rural white communities in stopping oil and coal port terminals that would damage treaty fisheries.

These cross-cultural populist alliances have stopped more than a dozen other oil, coal, and gas shipping projects in the coastal chokepoint of the “Thin Green Line.”

Some settler neighbors now view the tribes as stronger guardians of their local environment and economy than their own governments, as I’ve documented in my book *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands*.

Environmental repossession. Native leadership has driven these processes of what Chantelle Richmond and Katie BigCanoe call “environmental repossession.” In the opposite of Rob Nixon’s “slow violence,” tribes are driving a slow decolonization to reverse colonial harms.

Tribes are also asserting #PowerBack for reasons other than ecosystem protection. Due to their gaming and treaty resources, Washington tribes have become the largest employers in some rural counties, investing in local economies, and opening their wellness centers to all.

With cultural authority as the original peoples of their homelands, they’re promoting and funding off-reservation art and media projects, tribal canoe journeys, community festivals, place-name changes, tribal gardens and wild plant gathering, and other means to reassert their presence.

And they are using public education to gradually educate the settler public to support tribal goals, with a law to force the teaching of Native histories and cultures in Washington public schools.

As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang describe, the “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” is needed for decolonization to become meaningful and material rather than symbolic expressions of settler innocence or white saviorism. This repatriation can include extending Native power back to restore their stolen ancestral territories whether or not they own the parcels of land.

Pacific Northwest Tribes are playing a long-haul game, in the context of their 12,000-year history. The treaties were signed only the lifespans of two 86-year-olds ago. In the past 52 years, they’ve used the treaties as tools to protect their stolen ancestral lands. The settler state can block the narrow definition of land back, but are having a harder time in blocking the wider reality of power back, even in this era that is more hostile to tribal sovereignty. And they seem to be increasingly worried about Native successes in shifting the narrative.

Anti-Native backlash. I’m part of a loose network of activist-researchers who’ve monitored the anti-Indian movement for decades, to read and decipher their garbage so you don’t have to. In this century, they haven’t been very effective in their propaganda,

because they have been so laughably fixated on the narrative of racial “special rights,” even though Native rights are based on political sovereignty and cultural endurance, not on race.

Some Native leaders and educators are today making the case that because Indigenous rights are not “race-based,” they should be exempt from the white backlash against CRT and DEI.

But the problem is that right-wing media are renewing a distinct line of attack against Native studies as a threat to the national narrative, and are now focusing their ire on Indigenous rights as a threat to settler states’ entitlement to land and resources. Their message is starting to shift away from race and toward place, and who controls it.

Part of the reason for this shift is that critical Indigenous frameworks are now being applied to

Israel as a settler-colonial state. But another reason is that they fundamentally question the origins of the U.S. and Canada, which right-wing analysts now deem an even deeper threat than the questioning of historic racial policies within those states. Just because Native movements for sovereignty aren't about CRT or DEI doesn't protect them by any means.

Their reaction reveals some of the reasons behind Trump's recolonizing drive, celebrating "Manifest Destiny" in DHS recruitment posts, harassing Native citizens, changing Denali back to Mount McKinley, and threatening Greenland just as it's poised to become the first independent Indigenous state in the Americas.

Jeremy Carl in the Claremont Institute's *The American Mind*, redefines Northern European Christian whites as "a nation of settlers...on the frontier," distinct from post-1890 immigrants "of different colors, creeds, and cultures."

Adam Kirsch's ridiculous article in *The Atlantic*, "The False Narrative of Settler Colonialism," denied the existence of settler colonialism anywhere.

Michael Powell in the *Atlantic* denounced settler colonialism as "a term much in vogue among activists and academics on the left. To talk of settler states and oppressed Indigenous people...is to construct a morality tale."

Samuel Lair in *The American Mind*, denounces the known narrative that 'America is systemically racist' but that the new narrative 'America is built on stolen land,' ...may be no less essential to the efforts to teach our youth to hate or repudiate — their own nation."

Lair asserts, "One of the most underhanded ways to sneak postcolonialism into K-12 social studies is through lessons on 'tribal sovereignty' in civics. ... to illustrate that the fight against settler colonialism is an ongoing struggle."

Lair claims, the message—that America was stolen...makes postcolonial ideology...an ideology of sedition, which is why it fetishizes indigenous 'resistance and resilience.'

Lair concludes, this "divisive and militant ideology has no place in our children's classrooms.... we must purge it from our education system and reaffirm the nobility and justice of our political and cultural inheritance."

This is what makes the new anti-Native backlash so dangerous, as it learns and adjusts its message. Right-wing analysts (with some liberals) are admitting that Native rights are not based on race, and that Native sovereignty threatens the deep underpinnings of settler colonies.

Their real battle is more accurately about settler-state control over land and natural resources, and they're more than willing to fight on those grounds, from North Dakota and B.C. to Greenland, Venezuela, and Iran. We should not just condemn this backlash as racist, but as colonial genocide denial.

Now when anti-Native analysts decry what they implicitly see as an "creeping reindigenization" of historic Native lands outside the reservations, they're actually on to something. Power Back, as a nascent and parallel expression of Land Back, can become a fundamental challenge to the entitlement of the settler colonial state.