

# Wages for Earthwork

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*This essay proposes a novel paradigm for a political theory of climate justice: wages for earthwork. Indigenous peoples have disproportionately contributed to the sustainable stewardship of the natural world through ecological systems of governance, which I theorize as “earthwork.” Proponents of climate reparations have focused on reparations for unequal climate damages from emissions. By contrast, I propose “wages” or reparations to Indigenous peoples for debt owed to them for their devalued climate work. This framework makes use of an analogy to the 1970s feminist wages for housework movement, which sought to reveal the exploited and yet indispensable character of systematically devalued work rendered natural and invisible. I contend that (re)valuing earthwork must also be central to projects aimed at decolonizing climate justice, that is, anticolonial climate justice. More than monetary transfers alone, wages for earthwork prioritize the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty and land and wider structural transformation of colonial capitalism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Theorists of environmental politics once focused much of their argumentative arsenal on the pressing need for sustainable or “green” transitions—that is, a transition towards renewable energy, and away from fossil fuel-based economies. That debate about whether or not to move away from extractive economies based on fossil fuels *at all* is (unfortunately) still necessary, despite the definitive scientific consensus on human-caused climate change.<sup>1</sup> Yet now contests among different just and unjust modes of green transitions have moved to the center of debates about environmental and climate justice.


The “how” of green transition is key, since adaptation to climate change could reinforce, incrementally shift, or transform extant modes of production and sociopolitical hierarchies. Current paradigms that dominate ideas about building sustainable economies largely ensure that whiter, wealthier communities are able to adapt while externalizing the most extreme costs of climate change (droughts, floods, pollution, the costs of extraction *for* green transition, etc.) onto the global south and race-class subjugated communities in the global north (Ajl 2021; Brand and Wissen 2021; Greenfield 2023; Roberts and Parks 2009). In this regard, dominant policy frameworks, whether under

the rubrics of energy, food systems, or conservation, are frequently themselves a product of—or, less charitably, an ideological effort to further secure—exploitative and extractive regimes.

If nothing changes in these regimes, then green transition itself will continue to be premised on imperial and colonial techniques of capitalist accumulation. Hence, benefits will flow primarily from the global south and race-class subjugated communities in the global north to elites in the global north (and, to a lesser extent, elites in the global south) (Davis and Todd 2017; Kothari 2021; Monet 2023; Sultana 2023). Such critiques are already raised extensively in many radical and particularly global south, Indigenous, and Black diasporic intellectual traditions (Perry 2021; Powys Whyte 2018; Pulido and DeLara 2018; Yusoff 2018). In grassroots activist spaces, there are many efforts underway to make fundamental changes to the very way that climate change is approached as a problem, including those by some global south states, Indigenous peoples’ forums, food sovereignty movements (Daigle 2019), and poor peoples’ organizations. In broad strokes, these scholars and movements advance a diverse range of egalitarian and reparative visions for global anticolonial justice by insisting upon their experience of climate change itself as an intensification of preexisting structures of colonial domination (Allard-Tremblay 2023; Powys Whyte 2017a).

Nevertheless, these structural accounts of the climate crisis remain marginal in the mainstream political theory/philosophy literature on “environmental ethics” and in more institutions-focused applied work on global justice. Such literatures still center on highly individualized or ideal-theoretic notions of moral responsibility and agency, which treat deep historical structures shaping contemporary global power relations as ancillary to core philosophical questions (Goodhart 2023).

This article contributes to discussions among scholars and activists who seek to encourage a more

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<sup>1</sup> As United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (2023) “synthesis” observes with “high confidence”: “Human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. This has led to widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people.”

structural and transformational approach to green transition, sometimes called “transformative adaptation” (Pelling 2010; Schlosberg, Collins, and Niemeyer 2017, 430–1). By way of critique, I especially highlight how dominant frameworks are built out of—and have never fully been divorced from—histories of colonialism, white supremacy, and empire. More constructively, my intervention aims to revise the notion of *climate debt*. Climate debt can generally be defined as a debt owed by the global north countries (or global north and a much smaller pool of global south elites) and/or fossil fuel corporations to the global south and race-class subjugated communities in the global north. This debt is owed on the basis of global north countries’ historical responsibility for 92% of carbon emissions (Hickel 2020), over-consumption of the earth’s resources, and damaging use of peripheral communities’ ecosystems as carbon sinks and waste dumps. The framework of climate debt is bound together with political discourse and mobilization for *climate reparations*. Climate reparations typically include monetary transfers that aim to remediate this debt. They may also be made central to more widely reparative political projects, in which monetary transfers support expansive efforts to transform the underlying systems shaping distributions of climate burdens and benefits (Táiwò 2022).

I propose a distinct paradigm of climate justice to orient existing anticolonial theories of climate repair. I call this paradigm *wages for earthwork*. The point of departure for the wages for earthwork model is a close engagement with Indigenous peoples’ movements for sovereignty and self-determination as key agents of climate justice. As I have argued in previous writing on twentieth century Indigenous political thinkers (Temin 2023), Indigenous movements have enacted and demanded the self-governing powers to (re)build ways of life and political-ecological systems founded on care for the earth. These systems of care for the earth take significant work, especially so under today’s highly constrained colonial conditions. I define the labor that goes into these systems as “earthwork.”<sup>2</sup> Building on this concept of earthwork, I label the interpretive lens and constructive political agenda that emerges from this “wages for earthwork.” I make use of an analogy to the 1970s feminist international wages for housework (WFH) movement (Federici 2020; Forrester 2022; James 2012). Specifically, the title relies on an analogy to the WFH’s contention that the unwaged work of reproducing the household (and social reproduction more broadly) has been an ideologically obscured lynchpin of the maintenance of capitalist wage relations.

Taking a page from WFH, my analysis shows how “earthwork” is also a form of systematically devalued work that is rendered natural and invisible, yet it is necessary to sustain life on earth. Globally, Indigenous, Black, peasant, and working-class populations (especially women) bear a disproportionate burden of

this work of taking care of the planet (Barca 2020; Naidu and Ossome 2016). As Federici (2020, 161) observes, “in the face of a new process of primitive accumulation, women are the main social force standing in the way of a complete commercialization of nature.” Dominant green transitions largely disavow those everyday ecological practices and social movements securing popular access to land and popular participation in driving the healthy functioning of ecosystems. Within this much wider array of eco-sufficient survival strategies, practices, and philosophies, my notion of earthwork specifically builds on scholarship in Indigenous climate studies and political ecology. Analytically, this approach reorients interpretive lenses in climate justice and Indigenous studies. Specifically, I build out undertheorized connections between (the erasure of) subjugated ecological labor and philosophies of sovereignty and self-determination at the heart of Indigenous peoples’ movements. Wages for earthwork is a valuable (but not comprehensive) approach to climate justice rooted in an interpretation of the recovery of Indigenous governance capacities (Krakoff 2011) as conducive to the flourishing of usurped practices of ecological labor. This approach practically calls for (re)valuing earthwork by prioritizing the renewal of countervailing Indigenous sovereignties, land tenure, and the social relations through which such caretaking practices are realized.

Practically, my framework has tangible, material implications that reconceive the criteria for a just green transition. The core idea is that the erased labor of caring for the planet ought to be acknowledged, compensated, and materially supported in social movements, public policy, and law (Johnson et al. 2023). Such a focus equips us first with a way to critique environmental governance practices that materially undermine Indigenous earthwork. Such practices are objectionable both because they are normatively unjust and practically self-defeating. As such, I contend that earthwork, as secured and expressed through Indigenous sovereignty and land tenure, should be valued and rendered institutionally binding. Environmental governance should not undermine and render such practices more precarious, as they currently often do—ironically and counter-productively in the name of saving nature. Instead, acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty as a key source of earthwork is one important way to (re) integrate people and the planet into mutually beneficial relations. An upshot of this argument is that support for this specific trajectory of decolonization holds promise as an important piece of efforts to decarbonize the global political economy.

To briefly clarify at the outset, consider how wages for earthwork differs from many existing conceptions of climate debt also pitched in an anticolonial key. As one recent example of more prominent climate debt and climate reparations discourses in international negotiations, consider how PM Mia Mottley of Barbados and PM Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan issued similar demands before audiences at COP 27. In the shadow of extreme flooding in Pakistan and drought in the Horn of Africa, they argued that the global north ought to

<sup>2</sup> There is a distinction sometimes made in political theory between work and labor (Arendt 1998). I use the terms interchangeably here.

live up to longstanding commitments to compensate the global south countries by financing a “Loss and Damage Fund” for vulnerable countries, defined as those that have contributed the least to climate change but are most vulnerable to its worst effects (United Nations Environment Programme 2022). Crucially, theirs is not a plea for aid or charity, as it is often represented by the US and other G20 countries. Rather, Mottley and Sharif constructed arguments calling for reparation for such debts. Such reparation serves both as (backward-looking) compensation for unequal and exploitative atmospheric appropriation and (forward-looking) provision of the resources necessary for countries most affected to adapt and build green infrastructure for the immediate effects of climate catastrophe (Chan 2022).

An important line of thinking among political theorists and political ecologists in step with these political demands now raises the possibility of reparations paid from the global north and fossil fuel corporations to the global south to discharge climate debt. By some estimates, the “Carbon Majors” should pay some \$170 trillion in compensation for past and future emissions to the most affected communities (Fanning and Hickel 2023).

Complementing these approaches, wages for earthwork introduces another angle into these debates. I base the model on the notion that Indigenous peoples have disproportionately contributed to the stewardship of the natural world, beyond simply not damaging the planet. My underlying claim about the disproportionate nature of this contribution aligns both with Indigenous climate studies and more recent research in ecology and conservation science. In finally catching up with Indigenous climate studies, ecologists have now painstakingly demonstrated across many cases how Indigenous stewardship is key to the basic maintenance of ecosystems and biodiversity throughout the world (Garrett et al. 2018; Schuster et al. 2019). On this basis, I contend that restitution is also owed to Indigenous peoples for the ecological debt they have incurred, a debt that results from the labor of making sustainability possible for theirs and many other communities. As I have argued, proponents of anticolonial climate reparations have importantly targeted climate damages. I propose what I regard as a complementary program: systemic repair for Indigenous peoples’ accumulated and ongoing climate work. As a result, arguments for reparations in anticolonial climate justice find an alternative, complementary grounding. They aim to repair, support, and (re)empower systems through which Indigenous peoples incur embodied ecological debts via their earthwork.

In proposing such a model, I aim to join other scholars and activists who see the pursuit of global climate justice as central to radically transforming a world fashioned by imperial and colonial domination (and vice-versa) (Táíwò 2022). Wages for earthwork is meant as a complementary (not competing) paradigm, one which can expand how scholars and activists imagine avowedly reparative notions of climate justice in

line with a long history of grassroots social movement struggles for environmental justice (Schlosberg and Collins 2014).

Importantly, this framework includes but also goes beyond the important analysis of unequal exposures to environmental harm dating back to the 1980s under the rubric of environmental racism (Liboiron 2021). As the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2023, 5) summarizes, “Vulnerable communities who have historically contributed least to current climate change are disproportionately affected.” This is true and remains indispensable. My argument here focuses on the underlying structural conditions that ensure peripheral populations’ continued unequal and exploited contributions to sustainable social and ecological labor (Ajl 2023; Prasad 2019), which are crucial to building just constructive alternatives to current arrangements. Accordingly, this conception of anticolonial climate justice focuses on generating conditions conducive to constructive climate agency, which is connected but not reducible to attention to disproportionate harm, deprivation, and structural domination.

The argument proceeds as follows: The first section offers a brief account of earthwork, drawing especially on Indigenous feminist and ecofeminist analyses of climate (in)justice. This section conceptualizes Indigenous sovereignty as a form of earthwork. The second section contrasts earthwork with other models of the human-nature nexus. Specifically, I show how dominant frameworks for capturing the value of nature, such as natural capital and ecosystem services, erase and disavow the regenerative contributions of (those doing) earthwork. The third section argues that these modes of environmental governance derive deep background claims from a longer history of practices and ideologies of settler colonialism as a form of socio-ecological domination effected through the erasure of Indigenous earthwork. I revise current accounts of settler colonialism by emphasizing how land dispossession disrupts Indigenous peoples’ material capacities to fulfill continually degraded and burdened responsibilities of earthwork. The fourth and fifth sections, respectively, detail how wages for earthwork entail the refashioning of key philosophical and political aspects of projects of anticolonial climate justice.

## DEFINING EARTHWORK

By earthwork, I mean the direct, “hands on” work of caring for the earth done by Indigenous peoples. Earthwork is contextual and specific to places. I aim specifically to capture the highly intimate and granular place-based knowledge and labor that aims to allow the co-existence and flourishing of the living world, including human, non-human animals, plants, physical entities with emergent properties (rivers, mountains, forests), and ecosystems (Powys Whyte 2017b, 160; Troster 2002). Such practices also enable the interdependent flourishing of the earth as a whole subject that emerges out of these nested mutually supportive



interactions across communities or ecosystems (Cochran et al. 2013).<sup>3</sup> In general, practitioners become skilled at earthwork by learning the conditions of survival and flourishing of those other beings across generations (Cochran et al. 2013). Within place-based knowledge systems (Coulthard 2014, 13), these practices require fostering ethical qualities proper to the maintenance and adjustment of enduring reciprocity-infused relationships as part of the social and cultural fabric of everyday lives, ceremony, and political governance (Powys Whyte 2018). Indigenous societies carry out place-based duties embedded in locally sensitive human-nature nexuses (Espejo 2020).

Of course, not all Indigenous activities are earthwork.<sup>4</sup> Yet across many contexts, it is true that earthwork—as embedded in systems of community caretaking—has very practical, well-studied effects. In the Anishinaabe context of the present-day Great Lakes region, for example, governance has historically been attuned to making these systems of reciprocity flexible and dynamic. Seasonal rounds have been implemented to adjust to seasonal needs and other forms of environmental variability (Powys Whyte 2018, 130; Witgen 2012). Across other contexts globally, diverse Indigenous practices include controlled burning that induces regrowth of particular plant populations and heads off catastrophic wildfires (Hart-Fredeluces, Ticktin, and Lake 2021; Kimmerer 2015), culling and harvesting practices that likewise induce restorative growth (Anderson 2013; Kimmerer 2018), and regenerative agricultural practices that link food sovereignty to biodiversity preservation (Perfecto and Vandermeer 2009). Moreover, I interpret projects of defending the earth against militarized forms of extractive accumulation (Menton and Billon 2021)—including in transition to renewable energy (Riofrancos 2023)—themselves as efforts to sustain the conditions for earthwork. Under conditions of colonial domination or the constant

threat thereof, the community self-defense and advocacy of self-described “protectors, not protestors” shelters this more everyday work of Indigenous sustainability (Ka’ōpua 2017).

For now, two additional features of the concept of earthwork should be noted. First, because many Indigenous political ecologies do not generally think of humans as above and/or outside of the living world, earthwork is not separate from human flourishing. Deloria (1973) argues that places themselves exert a “pull” or “force” on the shape of human commitments, and vice versa. In some Indigenous conceptions, such as the Lakota-Dakota covenant with the buffalo nation (Estes 2019b), collective self-determination and well-being hinge on the fulfillment of right relations with these particular non-human kin.

Some thinkers describe this as the “kincentric” organization of social life and ethical consciousness, which prioritizes attunement to the intelligence and gifts of other beings in ways that reject “dominion” over the earth (Salmon 2000; Vásquez-Fernández and pii tai poo taa 2020). More prosaically, “place-based societies” have positively intervened in and benefit from ecosystems as “a key functional player” (Bird and Nimmo 2018; Kimmerer 2011). The continued influence of dominant colonial models of environmental conservation since the late nineteenth century has meant that the reality of these convivial relations is still often disavowed. Colonial models, sometimes called “fortress conservation” (Dawson, Longo, and Survival International 2023), incorrectly equate ecological health with a reified non-human nature protected entirely from human disturbance (Buscher and Fletcher 2020; Hessami, Bowles, and Popp 2021).

Second, many Indigenous thinkers have articulated Indigenous sovereignty itself as a set of *responsibilities* to a specific territory, such as Monture-Angus’ (2000, 36) translation of the Mohawk term for “sovereignty” as “my right to be responsible.” Following this interpretation, Indigenous sovereignty itself often philosophically encompasses a set of capacities and powers conducive to earthwork. As Kiera Ladner argues, the Blackfoot Confederacy developed governance institutions and philosophies “out of people’s experiences with and knowledge of the local ecosystems.” (Powys Whyte 2017a, 165) describes how the creation of right ecological conditions through “complex relationships to place” is an activity constitutive of self-rule. It is itself “the substance of Indigenous governance systems.” In this holistic picture, the Indigenous avowal of human responsibilities creates the conditions for plant and animal beings themselves to fulfill their responsibilities towards humans and the rest of the living world (McGregor 2010). In short, Indigenous sovereignty can be understood, in alignment with caring labor, as a system of practices of earthwork guided through relationship-based responsibilities.

In making this case, I build on ecofeminists (Merchant 1990; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Plumwood 1993), Marxist feminist theorists of social reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2020; James

<sup>3</sup> Other non-Indigenous anticolonial, antiracist, and working class approaches to ecology resonate with elements of what I describe here as earthwork (Barca and Leonardi 2018; Harris 2017; Nixon 2013; Rickford 2017). Perhaps most prominent in the US mainstream is the work of Leopold (2020) on the land ethic, which likewise emphasizes active relationships between humans and nature. I focus on Indigenous philosophies and struggles for self-determination so as to lend textural specificity to core practices and their normative and political implications.

<sup>4</sup> Many Indigenous peoples have themselves been incorporated into extractive economies, undercutting the practical capacities of communities to actualize these “traditional” governance systems in new, flexible forms. Settler-states have explicitly engineered some contemporary forms of tribal governance to create extractive fossil fuel economies that have a patina of legitimacy because Indigenous societies themselves nominally authorize this extraction. In this respect, Indigenous communities exemplify the most extreme and long-running cases of the forced decisions disempowered communities are compelled to make between jobs and environmental degradation (Curley 2023). Nevertheless, they have struggled to restore their capabilities to govern themselves without coerced dependence.

2012),<sup>5</sup> and care theorists (Tronto 1993; 2013) who have variously theorized the modern assault on and subjugation of the direct embodied activities of ecological maintenance and restoration in relation to gender domination. For example, as Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher argue, care is “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto and Fisher 1990, 40). Like an array of other related caring activities (e.g., childcare, elder care, housework, food preparation), earthwork is necessary to ensure the continuance and repair of the web of life within mutually sustaining socioecological formations. In sum, the work of sustaining that which we call nature is itself a form of demanding, caring labor (Battistoni 2017; 2022). My focus on Indigenous sovereignty as/for earthwork, then, aims to bolster a robust account of anticolonial climate justice, one that extends to transnational hierarchies of power.

In the case of earthwork, the pretense to govern “nature” as a pre-existing reality, independent of these caretaking relations, emerges out of historical practices of gendered and colonial environmental domination (Salleh 2009). The ongoing tendency in environmental governance to reify nature in this manner still serves as an ideological strategy (or unreflective commitment) that makes earthwork practices invisible and devalues those doing them. As I argue in the next section, what is often represented as pristine nature untouched by human society in western political thought and in new international systems tallying “ecosystem services” is frequently the ideologically obscured product of this unrecognized community labor. It is, therefore, an important first step simply to name earthwork and illustrate its disavowed centrality to the task of establishing healthier relations between people and the planet. Wages for earthwork as a model of climate justice encourages both backward and forward-looking efforts to re-equip some of the earth’s most important human caretakers with the practical tools and macro-structural conditions necessary to do the work of care—and to do it under less violent, constrained, and unfair conditions.

More than merely positing an abstract moral duty to repair injustice, at stake here is the need to reconfigure prevailing global power relations. All humankind benefits from Indigenous earthwork, but as with other forms of care work (Tronto 1993; 2013), the most powerful live parasitically off the benefits of these practices in ways we do not realize or have a vested interest in disavowing. Persons disproportionately performing earthwork are endemically devalued, which is

part-and-parcel of the way that such indispensable work is made invisible and rendered valueless. This division of “who [must] care” and who has affordances not to do care work reflects and reproduces forms of subjugation endemic to patriarchal, white supremacist, and colonial-capitalist social relations that have taken shape most recently as neoliberal globalization (Glenn 2012; Parrenas 2001). It is by virtue of this deeply hierarchical structural picture, which carries forward the structural effects of past injustice, that these benefits and burdens should be redistributed in far more egalitarian ways.

Systems of settler colonialism, in particular, make earthwork into a burdened, frequently disrupted, and consistently devalued form of labor. Earthwork is also gendered in two ways. First, Indigenous women bear the brunt of particular forms of gender and sexual violence that accompany the colonial denial of Indigenous jurisdiction and more specifically the introduction of extractive economies (Deer 2015; Estes 2019b). More broadly stated, settler-states, especially working with religious institutions, have carried out the structured dispossession of Indigenous societies by annihilating and coercively reshaping gender systems integral to land tenure and other “governing institutions in which Indigenous women held power alongside men” (Maracle 2015, 132, 151; Meissner and Whyte 2017). Second, Indigenous women also take on leadership and responsibility and often hold specific forms of knowledge in ways that extend and/or reinterpret their historical places in governance and kinship networks (Vinyeta, Whyte, and Lynn 2015). These practices shape both day-to-day activities of earthwork and political movements in defense of the earth (Hernandez 2022).

At the extreme, earthwork puts protectors of the earth at significant risk of violence from the security forces of states and multinational corporations. Indigenous communities face oppressive conditions in defending their ecologies (often) as part of the defense of their very material livelihoods and responsibilities. According to a large-n analysis of environmental conflicts involving those in bottom-up struggles seeking to defend their local ecosystems: “defenders face globally also high rates of criminalization (20% of cases), physical violence (18%), and assassinations (13%), which significantly increase when Indigenous people are involved” (Scheidel et al. 2020). That is, in addition to the ecological degradation and coercive violation of their rights and dignity against which such communities fight, such self-defense constitutes a dangerous form of work done to secure and fulfill their responsibilities to the earth.

Theorizing Indigenous sovereignty via earthwork in this way properly recontextualizes Indigenous governance as an indispensable vehicle of subjugated yet exploited caring labor. Battistoni (2022) and Walia (2015) have argued that the more traditional sectors of the northern left (e.g., unions) need to radically rethink what and whose labor is called to mind in notions like “green jobs” and the “green economy.” Moving away from an industrial imaginary and social

<sup>5</sup> Theorists of social reproduction distinguish between productive and reproductive labor for purposes of a Marxist feminist critique of capitalist political economy. I refer to earthwork as a form of caring labor both for simplicity’s sake and because anticolonial earthwork blurs reified boundaries between productive and reproductive labor.

base that reinscribes the predominance of a white male working class, Battistoni contends that it is necessary to revalue the work of people doing ecological and social reproduction as part of a “Green New Deal for care” for an age of deindustrialization in the global north. Altogether, Indigenous peoples around the globe already work “green jobs” (Estes 2019a).

## EARTHWORK VERSUS ALTERNATIVES

There is a flourishing research agenda on “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK) as a distinctive way of knowing that stems from specific Indigenous peoples’ place-based practices in relation to western science (Kimmerer 2011; Nelson and Shilling 2018; Panci et al. 2018). While appreciative of this focus, I use the term earthwork to comprehend Indigenous sovereignty as a structurally devalued form of labor and a practice-oriented system of responsibilities. In doing so, I seek to call attention to the material conditions needed to implement these practical relations in place, through and in which TEK is fostered and applied.

Specifically, I use the notion of earthwork rather than “TEK” to emphasize the material character of the colonial injustice to be remediated in three ways. First, not all forms of knowledge learned and deployed in earthwork are “traditional” in the sense sometimes used in this literature. For example, Indigenous peoples in the US engage in practices that have a traditional basis, and they also pursue relatively novel planning practices updated to contemporary conditions. Both of these, “persisting” and “emergent” responsibilities, contribute to what Powys Whyte (2018) calls “collective continuance.” Second, I underscore earthwork in order to call attention to how settler colonialism strips away the material bases of these practices. For example, the Colville Tribes lost capacities of expanded social resilience and access to salmon as a “cultural keystone” species when the US removed them from their ecosystems and subsequently erected the Grand Coulee dam on the Columbia River (Lynn et al. 2013, 550). Third, earthwork is caring labor. Its laborious character must be acknowledged. Earthwork provides a counterweight to environmental degradation that Indigenous peoples have actively asserted as their responsibility. Yet it is important not to romanticize these ethically powerful assertions of responsibility because colonial structural conditions, including the rapid pace of climate change itself, ensure a completely unjust distribution of benefits and burdens stemming from Indigenous societies’ labor and knowledge systems. What is more, earthwork’s value is typically realized in exploitative ways that erase or perpetuate the subjugation of the people doing it. Specifically, earthwork typically only becomes seen as valuable to outsiders once land and natural resources that Indigenous peoples have adequately cared for are subject to primitive accumulation or to militarized conservation carried out in the name of all humanity. In this way, the independently beneficial values of earthwork in the form of resulting local ecosystem health are either

inserted into circuits of production through capital’s expropriation or are made the target of international NGOs’ and some states’ top-down conservation efforts (Dawson, Longo, and Survival International 2023; Igoo 2003).

Attention to earthwork initiates a critical standard and more deeply informed historical perspective from which to judge current political-economic framings of nature in environmental governance.<sup>6</sup> For some economists, the basic problem is that markets do not fully internalize the value of nature. Their conclusion is that by adopting alternative accounting models, “we” could more holistically attribute a proper value to nature (Dasgupta 2021). In this way, by commodifying nature to make its price reflect its “value” as a bundle of saleable capital assets (McAfee 1999), nature is properly valued in accordance with its necessity to capitalist production itself. For some, this means agreeing to qualify nature as a “natural asset,” which paradoxically means using market logic to “price the priceless” to incentivize investments in renewable energy, or in (empirically failed) efforts to offset non-renewable emissions through carbon markets (Greenfield 2023). These ideas are embedded in internationally accepted frameworks of national accounting dating to 2003 (Prasad 2019, 42), which budget in a steeper price of nature as a scarce commodity so as to incentivize corporations to refrain from damaging the natural world (DiPerna 2023).

In a related paradigm, ecological economists have built up a research program constructing nature as providing quantifiable services to humanity, or “payment for ecosystem services” (PES) (Costanza et al. 1997; 2017; Daily and Matson 2008). While some ecosystem services scholars recommend more contextual and power-sensitive approaches to appreciating nature’s value (Norström et al. 2020), syntheses of this field indicate broad convergence on economic definitions of value that “obfuscate the situated cultural and political histories (i.e., ‘views from somewhere’) that define entire landscapes and ecologies” (Kolinjivadi, Hecken, and Merlet 2023, 11).

Here, I narrow in on two central problems with attributing services or work to a wild “nature” so as to establish its exchange-value. The first of these is an empirical counterpoint: earthwork is part of a much wider array of human activities—including the specific environmental transformations that Indigenous peoples have wrought (Cronon 2003)—that have created or, at minimum, influenced the features of what we refer to as nature. Instructively studying this layered human influence on almost all (98%) of the environment, the ecologists Ellis and Ramankutty (2008) have argued for a shift to studying human-shaped ecosystems they call “anthrobiomes” instead of natural biomes. Other historians and ecologists have likewise

<sup>6</sup> Here I discuss prevalent notions of natural capital and ecosystem services but analogous critiques from my theoretical perspective could be made of other dominant environmental governance practices.



begun to study this longer history of unevenly applied and socially differentiated human activities across societies, biota, and geologies (Abrams 2020; Garnett et al. 2018; Morrison 2018). From this vantage point, “nature” is really layers upon layers of socio-natures (cf. Cederlöf and Rangarajan 2019). Of course, not all of these varied human-induced changes have been environmentally positive; earthwork is. The second of the problems with PES as a framework is that it will never make sense to attribute value to the natural world by negating the practices and political epistemologies that enable specifically regenerative contributions to local ecosystems.

With these objections in mind, my turn to earthwork further specifies a critical standard assessing two ways that PES and related approaches are misguided: The first is the mistaken idea that it is possible to correct market externalities by merely tweaking prices of nature. As to the latter, political ecology scholars such as Moore (2015) argue that capitalism is a form of “world ecology” structurally premised on predatory extraction through the artificial cheapening of extra-human natures. I agree with much of Moore’s analysis, but I focus more on the disavowal of human caretaking. Second, and more specific to my argument, is my critique of the claim that a *sui generis* “nature” is the entity creating such unaccounted-for value. PES and natural capital frameworks substitute nature for earthwork, thereby erasing the political-ecological relations and community caretaking that generate the commodifiable value these frameworks attribute post hoc to the ecosystems in question. In doing so, they elide the pluralistic and localized use-values of Indigenous societies (Prasad 2019, 42). The latter systems rest on unremitting “hybrid labor” (Battistoni 2017) that ensures positive sustainability and biodiversity outcomes. By contrast, PES ignores collective agency and “complex relational processes.” Proponents can only quantify narrow “epistemologically reductive” outputs as the services of a subject-less nature (Salleh 2009, 3).

Like other forms of unwaged or poorly compensated care work, Indigenous earthwork provides a coerced subsidy to dominant actors by furnishing desired spaces for extraction or aesthetic appreciation that global northern political and cultural institutions mistakenly and ideologically identify as pure wild “nature” or wilderness (Cronon 1996). Such claims to act on behalf of a universal humanity or nature license the dispossession of people engaged in eco-sufficiency-based practices (Suell 2022). For example, “there is not a single country where Protected Area laws recognize community land ownership” (Dawson, Longo, and Survival International 2023, 5). Moreover, in the vast majority of cases in which Indigenous populations lack state-recognized collective property rights, international standards grant states credit for their “non-use” of resources (Rakotonarivo et al. 2023). As Prasad (2019, 42) observes of the Indian case: “if the state is the legal owner of the forest, but the biodiversity is maintained because of the frugal use patterns of the local forest-dependent people, the PES does not

recognise the labour that goes into this maintenance. In other words, the use values produced by the environmental producer are ignored in such a system.” As Ybarra (2017, 5) points out with respect to the Quixpur in Guatemala, credit for earthwork accrues to the very states that render Indigenous peoples’ lived conditions more precarious by dispossessing them as criminal trespassers and/or refusing to recognize their land tenure. Ironically, international systems credit states when, in fact, states owe an accumulated ecological debt to Indigenous peoples.

## SETTLER COLONIALISM AS SOCIOECOLOGICAL DOMINATION

Frameworks like natural capital and PES are more recent responses to the environmental crisis. It is important to demonstrate, however, that their deep philosophical assumptions are far from arbitrary. Rather, these assumptions emanate from historically longstanding imperial and settler-colonial practices and ideologies. In this section, I turn to these underpinnings to show how they arose as ideologies out of constitutive contexts of justifying the Euro-american colonization and dispossession of Indigenous societies (cf. Gilio-Whitaker 2019).

In studying these contexts, scholars of settler-colonial studies have interpreted colonial invasion as premised upon the structured dispossession and occupation of Indigenous peoples’ lands (Coulthard 2014; Nichols 2020). I supplement this focus on the dispossession of land by showing how settler-colonization is likewise a form of socioecological domination predicated on the material erasure and ideological disavowal of earthwork. Namely, settler dispossession of land is a form of colonial ecological violence (Bacon 2018), insofar as such practices destroy and replace the material ecological labor and caretaking relations that many Indigenous peoples articulate as reciprocal responsibilities. By more precisely attending to this form of colonial domination stipulated in key threads of Indigenous anticolonial thought in this section, the next two sections will then reconsider frameworks of anticolonial climate justice that encompass the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignties as expressions of earthwork.

My argument here first requires a shift in definition so as to foreground how settler colonialism has always functioned as a way of usurping Indigenous modes of earthwork as both responsibilities and coercively devalued/unwaged work. Kyle Powys Whyte has provided the most apt starting point for discussing settler colonialism from this angle, by focusing on these socio-ecological dimensions:

As an injustice, settler colonialism refers to complex social processes in which at least one society seeks to move permanently onto the terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial places lived in by one or more other societies who already derive economic vitality, cultural flourishing, and political self-determination from the relationships they have established with the plants, animals, physical entities, and ecosystems of those places. (Powys Whyte 2017b, 158–9)

Powys Whyte's definition accordingly pins down the ecological erasure effected through settler-colonial invasion. For my purposes, it is important that this account centers more on how established social and ecological relations generate the more formal (and generally human-centered) notions of land rights, self-determination, or sovereignty as "power over" a particular space.

Scholarship on settler colonialism has tended to proceed on more generic terms than this, on the idea that colonial invasion primarily rests on the theft of land. Usually, it is now taken for granted that the aim of such invasion is to inaugurate and consolidate the foundations of a new settler economy, society, and state. In one canonical formulation, "settler colonialism destroys to replace" existing Indigenous societies (Wolfe 2006, 388). While this definition is still useful, it is missing the more positive normative content (Piccolo 2023) and material capacities for earthwork that have informed Indigenous accounts of the experience of dispossession. To this point, many Indigenous societies conceive of (settler-)colonial invasion itself as a form of structural domination or servitude over *both* Indigenous peoples' political and individual bodies *and* the earth itself (Maracle 2015, 143). Settler colonialism has ideologically required the erasure or redefinition of those relations between people and place that Indigenous societies have generated. Accordingly, settler colonialism involves the intentional and/or structural eradication of the existing modes of socioecological and political caretaking that pertain between Indigenous societies and their territories (Bacon 2018). In short, the specificity of this coupled material erasure and ideological disavowal cannot be fully captured by focusing solely on the colonial theft of territory as a harm that (anthropocentrically) concerns Indigenous peoples as dominated human collectivities.

Even critical accounts fail to attend sufficiently to how colonization violates earthwork as a set of positive Indigenous ecological agencies. Accordingly, I supplement such frameworks by addressing how settler-colonization as the recursive dispossession of land (Nichols 2020) also entails the recursive disruption of relations or systems of embodied labor with land (Simpson 2017) and of the views of human interdependence with the natural world that suffuse these material practices (Ghosh 2021, 187–90; Merchant 1990).

To put forward only one among other possible implications of this argument, scholars of settler-colonization have importantly focused on how Indigenous dispossession, especially in the US southeast, paved the way for the exploitation of Black [enslaved] labor on occupied Native land (Leroy 2016). Yet the role of Indigenous labor in the North American context remains peripheral to these discussions. One reason for this is that settler-societies recode the very relations Indigenous peoples already established between "culture" and "nature" prior to colonization as a raw state of nature (Tully 1994) or *terra nullius* (Pateman 2007) so as to vindicate the colonial dispossession of Indigenous societies. Colonial ideologies adopted to sustain such practices recast complex histories of

Indigenous and (more generally) non-western transformations by reinterpreting land as a virgin, de-humanized nature freely available for colonial expropriation (Gill 2021a; 2021b). This colonial reinterpretation set the stage for the subject-less nature of more recent natural capital and PES approaches. In earthwork's stead, colonial practices posit a desocialized and empty nature. Such raw nature then calls for the civilizational presence of settler institutions—including of environmental governance itself—to render it socially and politically valuable.

In sum, I understand settler-colonization as a series of projects of socioecological domination aimed at replacing and attenuating "socio-natures" that have distinctively conjoined land and labor through earthwork. Appreciating this historical backdrop is important because these processes have generated the deep underpinnings for environmental governance frameworks that seek to measure the value of nature. For example, contemporary conservation practices inherit the ahistorical assumption that nature can somehow be removed from human sociality and socioecological labor (Bird and Nimmo 2018). Such a stipulation only becomes plausible when assuming a colonial baseline, one which erases the fact that invasion materially and epistemically obliterates Indigenous societies' extant relational and distributed forms of human and non-human agency and labor. Settler-societies stifled and replaced those practices and landscape-effects of earthwork by figuring a divisible virgin nature, which can then serve either as a repository of extractable natural resources or of ecosystem services. Alongside capital accumulation, militarized "fortress" conservation on this model has justified the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Brockington 2002). In so doing, such colonial practices of nature conservation ideologically disavow the Indigenous earthwork that has empirically shaped deeply desirable features of spaces, such as those with iconic connections to settler-national heritages like US national parks (Abrams 2020; Anderson 2013).

## THE CURRENCIES OF ANTICOLONIAL CLIMATE JUSTICE

In the prior section, I conceptualized settler colonialism as a form of socioecological domination that sutures the dispossession of Indigenous lands to the material and epistemic erasure of Indigenous peoples' systems of community caretaking. If this is one key axis of colonial violence in need of repair, then any program of climate justice calling itself anticolonial ought to foreground projects of remediating earthwork. Specifically, I argue that earthwork should be (re)materialized through the recovery of Indigenous governance capacities and through the transformation of broader colonial structural conditions—that is, not only discursively and imaginatively but materially. This modality of the colonial and anticolonial lends specific contours to the substantive meaning(s) of decolonizing climate justice.



In general, climate justice requires attention to power, agency, and self-determination, that is, to who materially participates in creating the hegemonic meanings and institutions codifying what counts as environmental justice. More specifically, settler colonialism's mode of socioecological domination preconditions the ideological disavowal of earthwork in/as Indigenous sovereignty in the very framing of environmental governance practices. From the outset, this erasure writes off the very rights and capacities of Indigenous peoples, and sometimes even acknowledgment of their presence at all. In turn, they are excluded and erased from shaping what counts as justice and self-determination for both their communities and the earth (often conceived as inseparable) on their terms. The repair and restoration of earthwork as core to Indigenous sovereignties must become central to defining the substance of the "anticolonial" in anticolonial forms of climate justice.

As to the philosophical dimensions of this mode of anticolonial climate justice, I argue that the framework of wages for earthwork demands a shift in thinking about the very currency of justice. To show why, it will be helpful to juxtapose my framework with some of the ways that other scholars have developed climate justice frameworks. For example, some philosophers of environmental and global justice think of questions of ecological harm and debt through the lens of unjustified and unfair hierarchies of vulnerability (Shue 2014). In a more specific anticolonial key, philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò has argued that reparations for global racial empire must focus not only on remediating the past as such, but also on remediating the *structural conditions* inherited from the past. As a result, reparations must be "worldmaking" (Getachew 2019); today, that means creating just climate futures.

Like Táíwò, my framework also emphasizes links between anticolonial self-determination and egalitarian redistribution so as to refashion the structural roots of systems of racial hierarchy and dispossession. Also akin to Táíwò's reparations, my account of wages for earthwork is not exclusively backward-looking, and therefore, avoids objections that are often brought up to counter the more prevalent claims for climate debt and reparations as backward-looking "historical injustice" in general (Pickering and Barry 2012; Young 2011). Indeed, my argument aims to be forward-looking in the sense that my focus on earthwork as a critique of current colonial environmental governance frameworks results in more constructively commending a green transition that prioritizes the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignties and land tenure. These resurgences of earthwork are both important pathways through which to transform extant hierarchical social relations, and they are in themselves constitutively more just states of affairs.

Where I diverge from Táíwò is that I reject the notion that distribution should be the primary currency of anticolonial climate justice (cf. Sultana 2022). To be sure, wages for earthwork should

include monetary transfers if this is appropriate to repairing systemic harm, since the theft of land and labor also entails intergenerationally stolen wealth (Yellowhead Institute 2021). In this sense, the massive ecological debts that many states have incurred to Indigenous communities demand remediation in the form of monetary transfers to those communities. Yet, other highly pluralistic dimensions of value come into play, precisely because earthwork is labor that is also embedded in non-fungible concrete place-based social relations. Specific forms of structural transformation can lighten the burdens of earthwork, but earthwork itself does not admit of exchange or redistribution in the same manner as resources. In a Māori context, Watane (2020) has used the example of Kaupapa Māori research methodologies to show how Indigenous philosophies, when articulated on their own terms, may transform the content of global justice. For Watane, the notion of restoring sovereignty and Indigenous governance makes room for locally specific conceptions of value materialized through earthwork. Put otherwise, compensation must be compensation not only for *damages*, but also efforts to restore dynamic but colonially damaged relationship-based *practices*—some erased, some actually-existing, some emergent—that produce contextually appropriate forms of eco-sufficiency in projects of political-ecological self-determination.

Likewise positing an alternative to distributive justice alone, other theorists have attempted to articulate Indigenous societies' practices and political critique in a more expansive currency of "community capabilities." Such an approach dovetails with my focus on self-determination in grassroots environmental and climate justice movements (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010). While clearly overlapping, it seems to me that subsuming what I call earthwork into the notion of community capabilities, basic functioning, and participation, or even prioritizing sustainability as a "meta-capability" (Holland 2008), may undersell the role of place-based duties in the articulation of specific Indigenous philosophies in defining the substance of justice (Watane 2020). Instead, this specifically anticolonial mode of egalitarian social and political transformation includes the restoration of place-based duties both as instrumental to human well-being and as constitutive of collective practices of living well. In this sense, the order of priority capabilities scholars presume may well be the reverse: community capabilities might be just as aptly couched as preparatory to fulfilling duties of earthwork. In this account, the typically more universal slate of anthropocentric "capabilities" is itself aimed at fulfilling place-based duties based on eco-system caretaking. As a result, fulfilling such duties requires direct material support for Indigenous peoples' rights of self-determination and the restitution of the otherwise burdened forms of earthwork as the very substance of Indigenous self-rule. That is, wages for earthwork complements but is not reducible to other models of anticolonial systemic transformation through radically redistributive politics.

## THE POLITICS OF ANTICOLONIAL CLIMATE JUSTICE

Beyond philosophical vocabularies of justification, I also raise some political considerations as a response to the profound institutional inertia and resistance inherent to asymmetric systems of colonial power. As a first step to remediate socioecological erasure, Indigenous communities require sufficient pluralistic legal protections, collective rights to self-determination, and governance capacities to exercise autonomy over their lands and waters. Creating secure foundations for autonomy would enable Indigenous societies to materially defend and practice their concrete conceptions of environmental value through earthwork.

Such an orientation commends significant material restitution, specifically the return of land and sovereignty. Policies along these lines should include both remedial and forward-looking financial resources insofar as they are required to restore Indigenous political economies (Yellowhead Institute 2021). Proposals for a global care income (James 2021) or a conservation basic income (de Lange et al. 2023) likewise have appeal here, since they aim to equip the earth's caretakers with the significant resources to support this work, and to render earthwork's value for sustainability visible (alongside other forms of care work) under far more egalitarian structural arrangements.

Importantly, anticolonial repair in this mode cannot just work by appealing to the abstract ideals (or justice-based currency) of autonomy and/or sovereignty. Even putting these principles on secure footing requires a massive rebalancing of deeply asymmetric transnational power relations. This rebalancing stretches far beyond formal rights guarantees. Anticolonial climate justice in this mode prioritizes the adoption of binding packages of Indigenous collective and individual rights in national and international law, with teeth that extend beyond current frameworks on Indigenous "consultation." These forms of enforceable collective power should also extend to constitutional veto power over (colonially constructed) majoritarian institutions (Vergara 2023, 219).

Such a model differs from proposals for "co-management" arrangements between states and Indigenous peoples (Anderson 2013, xviii). The problem with co-management proposals is that they do not address why such projects should not already begin with or lead to the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination over their own lands. In other words, there is still a paternalistic, colonial sense that some higher authority guides how Indigenous peoples configure their land relations and self-determination. This tendency is amply discussed among scholars of conservation, who point out that conservation NGOs and their donors consistently cite benefits to local communities with little binding participatory inputs—let alone giving the land back (Matarrita-Cascante, Sene-Harper, and Ruyle 2019). Altogether, wages for earthwork would aim to limit significantly—and even structurally negate—the powers of states, multinational corporations, and

multinational conservation NGOs to determine the fate of Indigenous territories rather than Indigenous peoples themselves.

Since "nature conservation is foundational to capitalism and nested in the racialized colonial order" that criminalizes Indigenous earthwork (Sène 2023, 2), top-down conservation that rejects Indigenous land tenure and food sovereignty in favor of biodiversity should be rejected. "Indigenous-led" models of conservation that prioritize Indigenous self-determination are both more (or as) effective and do not perpetuate colonial socioecological domination (Artelle et al. 2019; Moosa and Roth 2019). Writing in *The Atlantic*, Ojibwe scholar Treuer (2021) has proposed that the US government should give the national parks back to Indigenous peoples and that an inter-tribal consortium should take over stewardship of the parks. This kind of model prioritizes Indigenous sovereignty, by refusing to treat Indigenous peoples as just one voice or "stakeholder" that is ultimately subordinated to settler-sovereignty. Likewise, many political ecologists now argue that the most practically effective way to protect biodiversity is to "support resurgent Indigenous-led governance" (Artelle et al. 2019; Garnett et al. 2018) and to secure binding community-based forms of land tenure appropriately attuned to local contexts (Rakotonarivo et al. 2023).

Shifting massive imbalances of power built into green transitions will depend upon building counter-hegemonic power in solidarity with Indigenous projects of decolonization, as the Indigenous activist collective the Red Nation (2021) has argued in their manifesto for a "Red Deal." Such solidarities are material, not abstract. To wit, one of the core principles for green transition in the global north political economies should be that social forms of transition minimize the invasiveness and intensity of extracting minerals like lithium, precisely because such practices will have dramatically negative effects on the well-being of Indigenous peoples and other local communities impacted on the other end of the global supply chain. Often reminiscent of past colonial invasions, this "decarbonization by dispossession" (Andreucci et al. 2023) tears at the capacities of communities to retain and further enrich their own practices of earthwork. By contrast, a focus on green public transportation would prove far less reliant on intensive extraction than the current US policy path of making lithium-dependent electric vehicle batteries (Battistoni and Riofrancos 2023; Surma 2023).

This kind of solidaristic self-transformation of the global north's "imperial mode of living" (Brand and Wissen 2021) along the supply chain also extends to the work of social movements (McKean 2020). Climate justice movements in the global north ought to prioritize Indigenous peoples' leadership and sovereignty, especially those on the frontlines doing the dangerous work of land defense against extractive colonial invasion. Support for blockades (Chua and Bosworth 2023) and other actions against extractive infrastructures are anticolonial practices of transnational solidarity. Materializing such solidarity is also one step in repaying

Indigenous peoples for ecological debts resulting from Indigenous earthwork's usurped and disavowed contributions to sustainability.

With respect to Indigenous struggles in the global south, restitution for the global north's (neo)colonial practices of environmental degradation is indispensable. In fact, among the best reasons for climate reparations from north to south is to reduce the pressures on global south governments to pursue extractive "resource nationalism" or colonial conservation on Indigenous territories to raise revenue for social programs and alleviate imperial domination and dependency (Riofrancos 2020). In this way, reparations for international imperial hierarchy and for future lost income for petro-states in keeping fossil fuels in the ground can both bolster decarbonization (Robinson 2023) and emerge as a complement to Indigenous decolonization as wages for earthwork.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that anticolonial climate justice requires close attention to the constructive agencies and philosophies of anticolonial movements in defense of local ecologies and alternative forms of environmental citizenships that bridge social and climate justice (Perfecto and Vandermeer 2009; Singh 2013). More specifically, the framework of wages of earthwork I have developed aims to articulate a political-philosophical model for climate repair by focusing specifically on Indigenous societies' diverse pursuits of sovereignty and land tenure. By comprehending settler colonialism as a form of socioecological domination that strips away earthwork, I have evaluated the normative and practical deficits and colonial ideological roots of central categories of environmental governance, such as natural capital, PES, and conservation. There is no way of accounting practically for environmental value—let alone *decolonizing* it—without foregrounding the caretaking systems embedded in Indigenous forms of sustainability.

In this sense, anticolonial climate justice depends not only on reducing aggregate and unequal environmental degradation but also on repairing Indigenous sovereignty as materialized through place-based duties of earthwork. Indigenous resurgence ought to be (re)valued at the heart of any kind of large-scale climate justice approach that aims to repair and reconstruct the world that colonialism has made. Alongside targeted reparative support for Indigenous sovereignty and land back, the task of revaluing earthwork calls for materially transitioning away from settler-colonial capitalism so as to respect and enable Indigenous sovereignty and land tenure. There can be no climate justice on stolen land.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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