

‘Attacks on the Earth and Indigenous women are intertwined’

written by Mahtowin Munro
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Mahtowin Munro. SLL photo: Greg Butterfield

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Before we start, let's take a moment to think about those who are no longer with us: Shirley Mills and many others. Our ancestors are beside us, holding us up today.

My name is Mahtowin Munro and I am the co-leader of [United American Indians of New England](#). Greetings to all of you who have traveled to the 50th National Day of Mourning! Some of you had to get up in the middle of the night to travel here. Take a look around at this amazing crowd!

We acknowledge the many struggles that you have carried with you today, from the many efforts to stop pipelines and protect the water to the ongoing work to free Puerto Rico from U.S. colonialism, to the attempted desecration of Mauna Kea by scientists who lack respect for Indigenous sacred places, to occupied Palestine. Our speakers today will reflect some, but certainly not all, of the struggles that Indigenous peoples are leading and involved in.

Defending tribal sovereignty is certainly as much an issue today as it was at the original National Day of Mourning in 1970. Native nations continue to have their sovereignty and land rights denied and infringed upon, regardless of whether the tribal nations have treaties or not, and regardless of whether they have federal recognition or not.

Both of the federally recognized tribes in this state, the Mashpee and Aquinnah Wampanoag, have had their tribal sovereignty restricted and have been denied the use of their own lands by settler governments. The U.S. government also continues to deny federal recognition to other tribes in the region, such as the Massachusett and Nipmuc, among others. Nevertheless, Indigenous tribes in this area continue to strengthen cultures and political sovereignty with or without federal recognition.

While writing this speech, I could not help reflecting on all of the terrible things happening to Indigenous peoples in the world today. In Bolivia, the Indigenous President Evo Morales was forced to leave the country as a result of a U.S.-backed

coup. As a result, Indigenous people there are dying at the hands of a fascist, CIA-installed government. Meanwhile, Indigenous people in Brazil have been under nonstop attack for defending the Amazon rainforest from destructive industries such as mining and logging. Some have been shot by the police, while others have been gunned down by hired assassins or private security forces.

Whether it's Australia or Honduras, Chile or Nova Scotia, Indigenous people continue to defend and protect their lands. It's really important for those of us who live here in the U.S. to show our solidarity with others in struggle and to bring public awareness to all Indigenous struggles and all acts of violence against Indigenous peoples, not just the ones occurring in North America. We are all united in our fight against settler-colonialism, and we must remember that what happens to one of us happens to all of us.

Children, families under attack

You know, as a mom, I always pay the most attention to the status of Indigenous children. Despite immense family and tribal efforts to improve educational outcomes and nurture our children, our children and youth are endangered in many ways. The residential school days may be over, but the Indian Child Welfare Act, which prevents our children from being stolen by non-Native people, is under attack and may end up going to the Supreme Court.

If the Indian Child Welfare Act is repealed, we could return to the grim time when Native children by the thousands were taken from their homes to be adopted by white families. Already, thousands of our kids are being put into foster care. This is one reason why we say the genocide of Indigenous peoples is ongoing, not something that happened in the past.

And at the U.S.-Mexico border, things have grown even worse this past year. More than 70,000 children were detained and caged by the U.S. government this year

alone. The U.S. leads the world in child prisoners.

Many of us who are Native to this country have been outraged by the treatment of our relatives from Mexico, Central America and South America. It is devastating to see their families torn apart just as our families have been splintered as a result of cruel government policies. Everyone must remember that no one is illegal on stolen land, and we join migrant communities in saying that “We didn’t cross the border! The border crossed us!”

But the immigrant nation that is the U.S. has a short memory and is in denial of its own historical facts. This government is descended from the invaders who forcibly took our lands and resources from us, and then denied us the use of our languages and cultures. One again, we ask the question: Who is the illegal alien, Pilgrim?

In the various discussions of so-called “illegal immigrants,” the settlers laud their own achievements, claiming that “America is a nation of immigrants,” while ignoring the centuries of murder and violence perpetrated against African and Native people by these same immigrants. Surely the deaths of tens of millions of Native and African people at the hands of marauding, malicious European invaders should be worth bearing in mind.

Wearing red to honor MMIWG2S

Murders continue today. Looking around right now, you will see that some people are wearing red to honor Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirits (MMIWG2S), and we will have a red dress at the front of our march.

In Canada, Indigenous women are murdered at a rate seven times higher than non-Indigenous women. In the United States, 84 percent of Alaska Native and Native American women have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime, ranging from psychological to sexual and physical violence, most often perpetrated by non-

Native men.

In Latin America, femicide — the murder of women because of their gender — is rampant, and the vast majority of cases go unpunished. Indigenous women are most at risk for this violence.

Underlying factors of poverty, racism, marginalization from justice and government services, legacies of colonial violence, and hypersexualized images of Native women in the media have made Indigenous women frequent targets. This crisis has largely been ignored and undercounted. Indigenous women are often not even included in statistics, even in regions with large Indigenous populations.

Trump announced on Monday of this week that the federal government is creating a task force on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Having extensively followed the many pitfalls of Canada's similar task force, I do not believe that this task force will enact real change. This task force will be grossly underfunded. The families and tribes of the missing and murdered may not be sufficiently involved and centered in the process so that they can get answers about what happened to their loved ones.

Unfortunately, the many underlying reasons for why MMIWG2S is a crisis will not be addressed. Will tribal legal sovereignty and jurisdiction be respected? Will racist settler attitudes toward Indigenous women change? Will there be an end to pipelines such as the Keystone XL and man camps?

Attacking the Earth and attacking Indigenous women are intertwined. The man camps and the resulting impact on Indigenous women is one of the many reasons why Indigenous people are fighting pipelines and mines and fracking.

End capitalism to fight climate collapse

We come together at a time when people are terrified about climate collapse and the

future and there is so much suffering already. I read this week that 60 percent of the world's animal population has been wiped out since 1970.

I want to say that individual actions are not going to save us when corporations and the U.S. military account for 70 percent of the world's pollution. Promoting a narrative of individual responsibility is not going to save us. Recycling and REDD and carbon offsets are not going to save us.

Hoping that capitalism will get kinder is not going to save us. The Green New Deal is not enough to save us. Only by listening to Indigenous people and dismantling the capitalist system, which allowed climate collapse to happen in the first place, will we be able to save the planet.

Indigenous peoples have always been caretakers of the land, water and the life therein, despite intense efforts of settler governments to stop us from doing so. For generations, Indigenous peoples have been warning about climate change.

It is not too late to achieve some climate justice on this planet, but Indigenous voices must be acknowledged and centered.

One of the many ways that people are working to center Indigenous voices is through education and legislation. Here in Massachusetts, we have an MA Indigenous Agenda that is supporting five bills: a bill to ban the use of Native mascots in public schools, a bill to redesign the racist state flag and seal, legislation to celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day instead of Columbus Day, an education bill and a bill to protect Native heritage. There's a lot you can do to help us get those bills out of committee. Please go to MAIndigenousAgenda.org for more information.

I end with a proposal, a starting place for the decolonization of our lands and a way to address climate collapse:

First, ensure that no projects can go through any Indigenous nation's land without

free, prior and informed consent.

Second, take all of the land that is currently being mismanaged by all settler governments, such as the National Parks or the Amazon rainforest, and let Indigenous nations manage that land. That would mean the restoration of millions of acres of our lands to us. It would also mean the end of desecration of our sacred sites, such as the Black Hills or Mauna Kea.

Third, cancel the leases, the pipelines, the mining and corporate contracts and start over.

Finally, since we all live here on this planet together, and since it is the only planet we have, we need to support and listen to Indigenous peoples all over the world who are on the frontlines of dealing with climate change.

I don't want anyone who hears this to give up. We can fight for climate justice. We can end settler colonialism. We can reclaim our lands. We are not vanishing. We are not conquered. We are as strong as ever.

