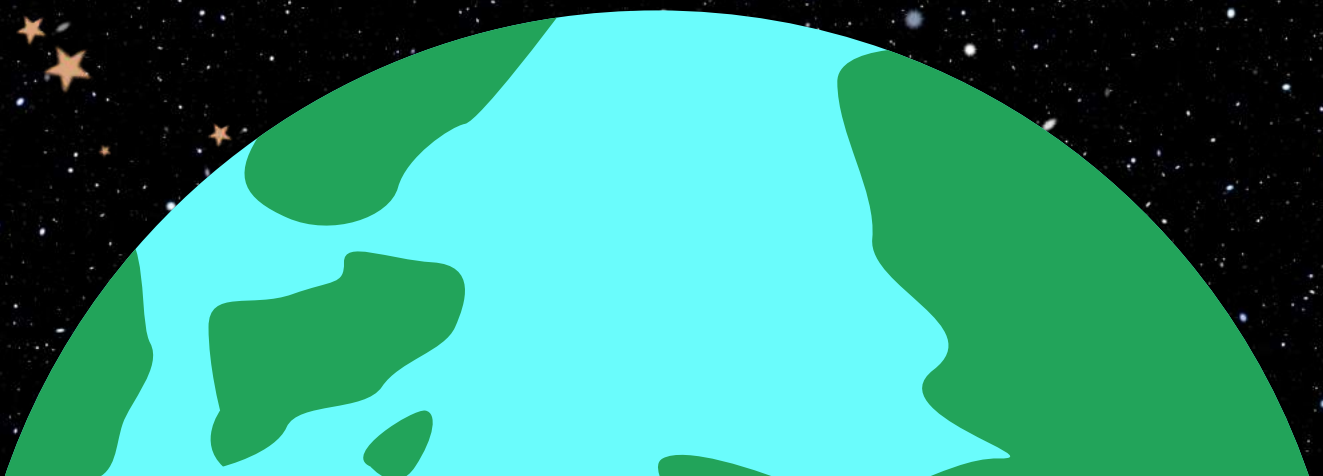


**CLIMATE JUSTICE
AND DECOLONIZING
ENVIRONMENTALISM
IN INDIGENOUS
COMMUNITIES:
JUSTICE AS SELF-
DETERMINATION,
ANTI-COLONIALISM,
AND ACTION**

By Maia Thomas

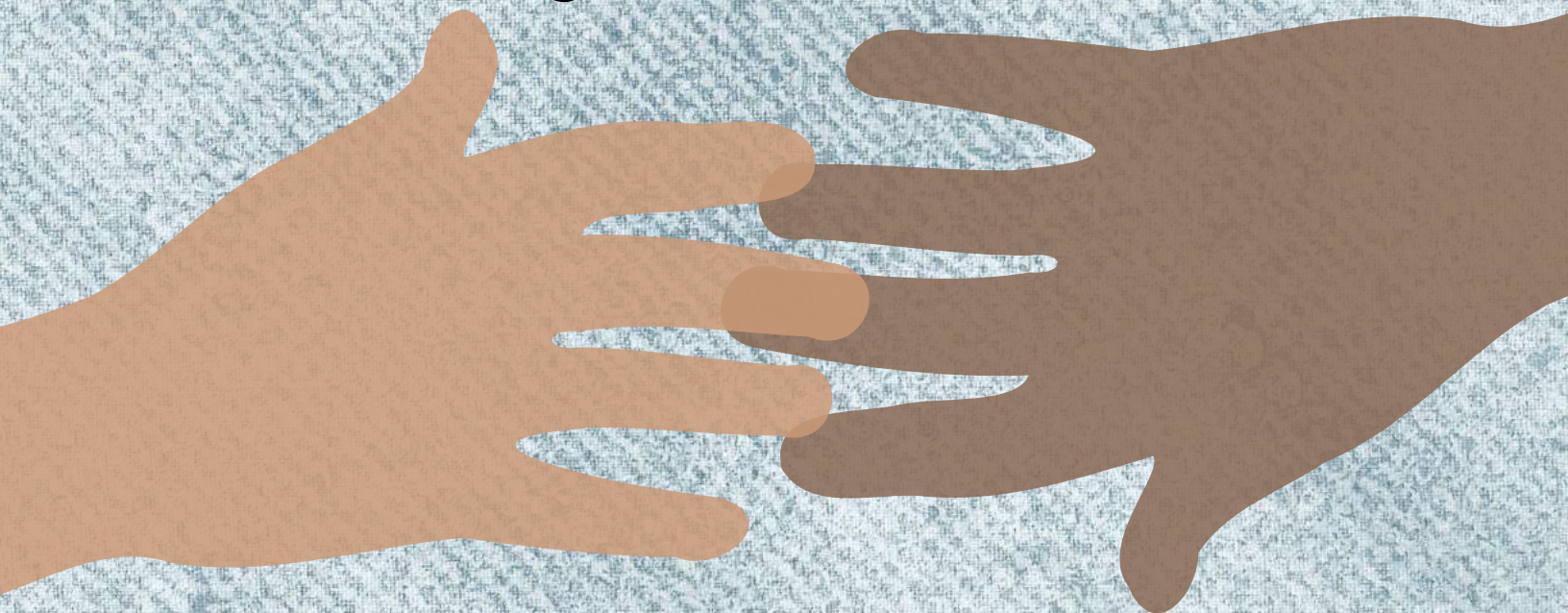


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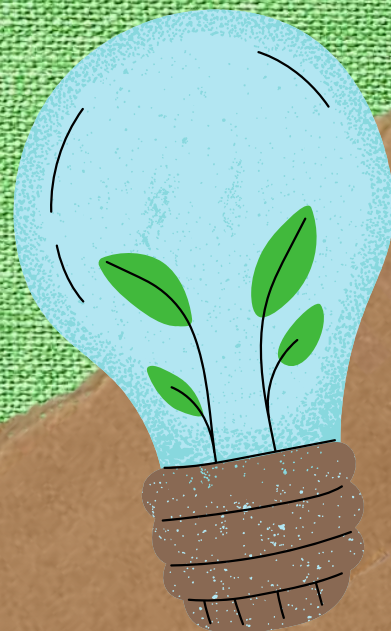
Positionality Statement

I was born in the U.S. and have spent most of my life in the West. I am of mixed heritage and identify as Latina. I apply an intersectional feminist lens to my research and am anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist. I believe that radical change is incumbent to mutual aid. I seek to write about and examine how community action and behavior challenges colonial structures.



Methodology

My research is focused on centering Indigenous perspectives in Latinx Environmentalisms to answer the question; What is actionable climate justice and what does it mean for communities that face ecological change first, like the Lenca, whose violated consent is integral to systemic climate injustice? First, I focused on refining the theories of knowledge that would guide my research and analysis like that of Latinx Environmentalisms and anti-colonial theory about Western epistemology that permeates through environmentalist thought. These frames shaped the line of inquiry and helped guide critical analysis while gathering information and finding photos that I felt portrayed community and action. The artifacts all represent an element of decolonial thought, self-determination, or borders in some way and connect to the focus of the project.



Introduction

A long and complex history has arisen from the colonial expanse into the Americas. As the legacy of colonial violence has grown into modernity, the Indigenous communities of Latin America have experienced the effects of climate change first and face those effects at a disproportionately high rate. The overlap and connection of indigeneity to Latine as an identity is cultural; both identities share lived experiences dealing with the repercussions of European domination. Indigenous communities suffer exploitation in unique ways that center environmental and climate injustices as their ancestral lands are exploited and abused by colonial entities. Indigenous sovereignty is unapologetically disregarded as carbon emitting industries drive up a profit based on the continual violation of consent. Restorative justice seeks to recognize Indigenous sovereignty and decolonize the foundations of environmental injustice that is levied against these communities, as we can see in the works of organizers like Berta Cáceres of the Lenca people. This research aims to answer the question; What is actionable climate justice and what does it mean for communities that face ecological change first, like that of the Lenca, whose violated consent is integral to systemic climate injustice? Decolonizing the framework of contemporary climate activism points to an all encompassing, long-term plan that enables the growth of both climate justice and indigeneity in which justice-oriented actions are guided by the qualities of self-determination, anti-colonialism, and transformation into action.





Self-Determination: Indigenous Perspectives on Relational and Ecological Tipping Points

Community organizing hinges on qualities of self-determination. Organizing is a justice-oriented action that centers closely on those relational concepts of consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity (Whyte, 2019, p. 2). These relational concepts exist in the face of their continuous violation towards Indigenous communities in South America, such as the Lenca people in Honduras. The violation of relational qualities has a directly causal relationship with ecological tipping points. Ecological tipping points are reached when exploitative agents seek to violate consent and abuse relational qualities for the furtherment of destructive industrial projects. The Lenca people resisted colonial efforts to build a dam on their land through community organizing and planned protest (The Goldman Environmental Prize). For the Lenca people, whose traditional lands are in what is now called Honduras, this violation of consent towards their sacred and recognized land was the intersection of the violation of consent and ecological tipping points (The Goldman Environmental Prize; Whyte, 2019). The dam project depended strongly on both violating the qualities of self-determination as much as it did on unsustainability because the commencement of the project would have cut many of the Lenca people off from their ability to sustainably manage their own food, water, and medicine (The Goldman Environmental Prize).



BERTA CÁCERES SITS ON THE BANKS OF THE GUALCARQUE RIVER IN THE RIO BLANCO REGION OF WESTERN HONDURAS. (PHOTO: GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE)

“We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism, and patriarchy that will only assure our own self destruction.

The Gualcarque River has called upon us, as have other gravely threatened rivers. We must answer their call. Our Mother Earth—militarized, fenced-in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated—demands that we take action.”

—Berta Cáceres (Cultural Survival, 2017)



BERTA CÁCERES AT THE COPINH (COUNSEL OF POPULAR AND INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS OF HONDURAS) OFFICES IN LA ESPERANZA, INTIBUCÁ, HONDURAS (PHOTO: GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE)

CÁCERES AT THE BANKS OF THE GUALCARQUE RIVER IN THE RIO BLANCO REGION OF WESTERN HOONDURAS (PHOTO: GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE)



BERTA CÁCERES GATHERED WITH MEMBERS OF COPINH AND RIO BLANCO DURING A MEETING REMEMBERING COMMUNITY MEMBERS KILLED DURING THE TWO-YEAR STRUGGLE. (PHOTO: GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE)

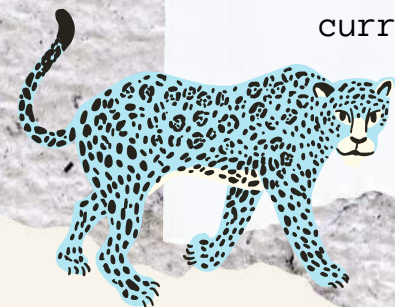
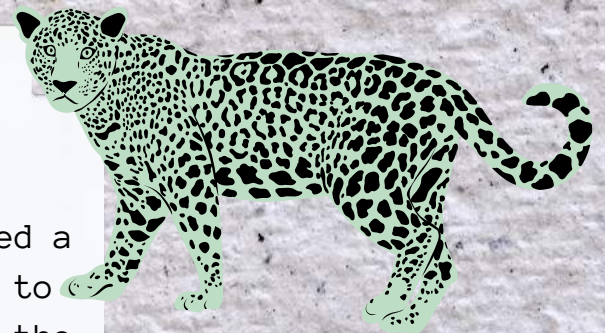
JUSTICE IS ACTIONABLE

Actionable justice includes resistance against colonial powers. Community organization against the dam project was headed by Berta Cáceres. She mounted a justice-oriented defense with her community against the oppressive agents of the dam project (The Goldman Environmental Prize). The coordinated action prevented the construction of the dam by maintaining a human blockade for more than a year until eventual termination of the project (Schatet, Cultural Survival, 2016). This resistance from Cáceres combatted a colonial bloc of powers against both profit motivated companies as well as government power. Organizing against colonial powers to reinstall relational aspects of consent is a markedly decolonial action.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"In pre-colonial periods, Lenca controlled a large territory that extended Guatemala to present-day El Salvador in the region of the Lempa River. During the Spanish invasion, the Lenca organized a decade long war of resistance led by warrior chief Lempira (after whom the national currency of current-day Honduras is named."

(Minorityrights.org)



THE TEXT READS: "500 YEARS OF STRUGGLE, WE WILL CONTINUE RESISTING. LEMPIRA LIVES! THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES!" (PHOTO: BELL, HUFFPOST, 2017)



The decolonial disturb the settler-colonial epistemologies in environmentalism (Wald et al., 2019, p. 7). The political landscape of Honduras heavily dictates how environmental justice forms. Government politics alienate Indigenous communities from decision-making and personal agency in these matters. Recognizing the limits to justice within a colonial border point to the failure of the legal and political system of Honduras to recognize the consent of Lenca people for the development of a dam on their land. Supporting this violation of consent and accountability were the organizers of the development; namely Desarrollos Energéticos SA (DESA) and the Chinese state-owned dam developer Sinohydro.

**DECOLONIAL
ACTION**



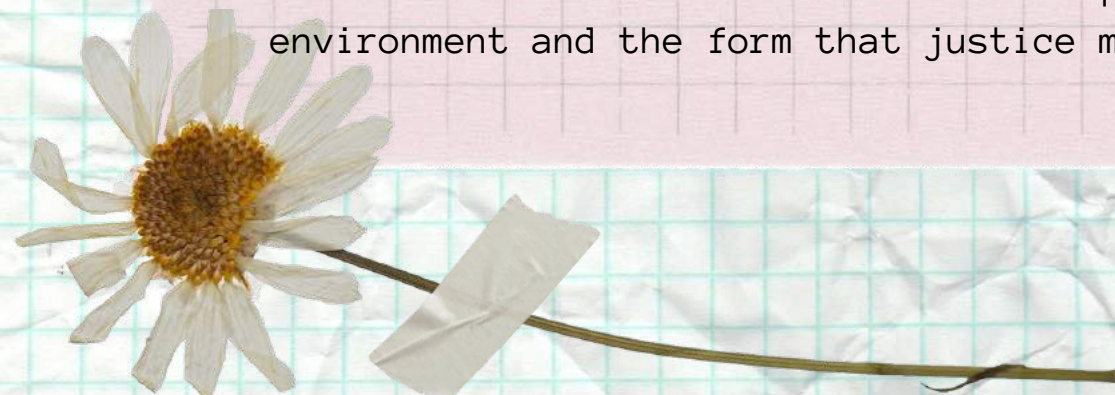
Colonial Boundaries and Borders

Wald et al. write that "Latinxs share an uneasy relationship with settler colonialism as both perpetrators of colonial violence as well as the object of settler colonial dispossession" (2019, p. 7). Complexities within environmentalism establish the decolonial frames that can disturb and explore environmentalist thought.

Recognizing the overlap of lived experience between perspectives as well as how experiences divulge can speak to the relational differences between communities and the land.

Borders can be a physical boundary that mark an areas but they can also exist in response to physical borders and manifest as racialized violence and alienation of community (Ono, 2012, p. 3). A significant characteristic for a border created within a political and social state is how different communities are limited in their access to justice. The Lenca people navigate life within the country of Honduras which presents boundaries as an indigenous community living within the statehood of a colonial entity.

The consequences of boundaries like this aggregate to violate the concept of self-determination, as when the Honduran government and large corporations colluded to develop Lenca land as its own. Identity becomes a powerful boundary for a community during resistance to colonialism because of how it informs the relational quality with the environment and the form that justice might take.



The Shape of Justice

Community organizing influences the community connection to the environment for the Lenca. Resistance and action shaped this connection in the seeking of justice for the degradation of self-determination. The connection between the environment and the relational converge in justice and community which Berta Cáceres exemplifies in legacy. However, the murder of Cáceres also sheds light on the grim reality for the Lenca people and their relationship with justice. Colonial violence haunts the idea of community organization and actionable justice.

(PHOTO: CULTURAL SURVIVAL, 2017)



JUSTICE AS A COLONIAL TEMPORALITY

The way that communities wield justice is described in one instance as a way to “call attention to the state of perpetual injustice, to the State or occupying nation’s hypocrisy in claiming to administer justice, and indeed to the direct role of the State in the systemization of injustice” (Tuck & Yang, 2016, p. 6). This description addresses the limitations of justice that many communities face, and it certainly pertains to the Lenca community, who have many community members to mourn as a result of the state’s perpetual use of colonial violence.

The definition of justice changes to fit the shape of its container. Similar to the theory of border, justice has boundaries that are not quantitative by a system. It can be situated as a “colonial temporality- limited actions within a colonial movement against colonial structures” (Tuck & Yang, 2016, p. 6). These authors define justice as something rather limited in action and long-term realization. Drawing from this idea that justice is informed by social structure and dominant ideology, justice can be drawn roughly as a figure that shifts according to specific time and place and is informed strongly by those in demand of it.

Conclusion

My inquiry into what actionable justice looks like and what it means for the Lenca people revolve mainly around Berta Cáceres and community organization. Self-determination, decolonial efforts, and actionable justice all shaped the important work that was done to prevent the dam development.

Most clearly recognizable is the fight to maintain relational qualities of consent, trust, and accountability. Organizing resistance in the community facilitated a demand for consent that could not be ignored. The repercussions and outcomes were significant for both the dam developers as well the Lenca community.

Ultimately, action-based justice strongly influenced a decolonial framework against environmental injustice that anticipated relational tipping points. Justice took a shape defined by the Lenca community and their action to successfully stop the building the of the dam.

**SELF-
DETERMINATION**

**ANTI-
COLONIALISM**

ACTION

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