

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

Summer 2020 • Issue #187

CLIMATE JUSTICE THROUGH COMMUNITY



**On the Road to a Solar Future
Kinship, Climate Justice, and COVID-19
Community Inventory in Transition Times
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Centering Blackness in Our Soils and Our Souls**



Kinship and Climate Justice

By Hilary Giovale

One frosty winter morning, a group of people gathered at the foot of a sacred mountain. A clear, azure sky framed snowy peaks in the distance. The mountain's name is *Doko'o'ostiiid* in the Diné language, *Nuva'tukya'dovi* in the Hopi language, and *Wihaagynpacha* in the Havasupai language. She is a Grandmother, a being of *K'é*, kinship.¹

The Original Peoples of this Land sat with the United States Forest Service. The parameters were tightly set, and the time limited to one hour. The purpose: to hear objections to the proposed expansion of a ski resort that was first built on the sacred mountain back in 1938. The existence of this resort has always been controversial due to the objections of Indigenous peoples. For the last eight years, the controversy has centered on the City of Flagstaff's decision to sell reclaimed wastewater to the ski resort at the rate of 1.5 million gallons per day, to manufacture artificial snow.²

In other words, old growth alpine forest was cut, pipelines were built, and toilet water is being pumped to the sacred mountain and sprayed onto ski runs throughout autumn, winter, and spring. Why? In recent decades, unstable climate made the ski

resort's business model less profitable. In 2005, the Coconino National Forest Service approved the ski resort's proposal to manufacture snow from reclaimed wastewater.³ Despite multiple lawsuits that raised concern about environmental harm, Indigenous religious rights, and cultural significance of the mountain, artificial snowmaking commenced in 2012, nearly quadrupling the number of skiers who had visited the resort during warmer, drier years.⁴

In the small room where we gathered, Forest Service officials sat at one end of the table. On the other side of the table, filling most of the room, were Indigenous Elders, spiritual leaders, and community organizers of various backgrounds, including Diné, Havasupai, and Mohawk. Several had traveled long distances to attend this meeting. Somewhere in the middle, I sat: a ninth-generation American settler of Scottish, Irish, and Scandinavian descent, in solidarity with the Indigenous community.

For one hour, I observed a tug of war between two worldviews. A Diné medicine man opened the meeting with a prayer; a Forest Service official then declared that she would start the meeting by

reading ground rules. A Forest Service official asserted that water and culture were not relevant to today's discussion; multiple Indigenous speakers then shared cultural teachings about Water as a Sacred Power, and their longstanding cultural relationships with the mountain. A Forest Service official proclaimed that only those seated at the table could speak; a Diné grandma then got out of her seat, walked to the table, and chastised the Forest Service for their disrespect, and for prioritizing capitalism over all else.

At the end of the hour, the Forest Service announced that the meeting was now finished. The Diné medicine man offered a closing prayer in his language, and a Havasupai Elder stood to offer a song in her language. She reminded us that we are all two-legged people, and that we have to learn how to live together. At their end of the table, some of the Forest Service officials had tears in their eyes.

Later that day, I went for a walk in the snowy woods. I had never attended a meeting like this before, and it was unsettling. I was agitated, but the agitation had no name. Finally, I sat in a sunny patch underneath a tall pine tree and cried. I had just received a taste of the Colonial Paradigm of Control: the mindset Indigenous peoples have been dealing with since the first Europeans arrived on this continent over 500 years ago. As a descendant of settlers, I was acculturated into this worldview for most of my life. But in this time of climate change, it is becoming apparent this Western mindset is clearly pathological.

The Colonial Paradigm of Control likes to make rules, set time limits, and compartmentalize issues into little boxes. It insists that business can only be conducted in the English language. It

commodifies land and water for profit. If a ski resort puts sewage on one percent of a sacred mountain, the exploitation of that one percent is justified, for profit and recreation: "we're in the business of providing fun."⁵ The Colonial Paradigm of Control asserts the rights of "the public" on "public land," because it has forgotten that these lands were stolen. The original members of the "public" were punished for being, and forced onto reservations and into boarding schools.

There is a glitch in the program of the Colonial Paradigm of Control: despite genocide, the Indigenous peoples of this land are still here. They know that the land does not belong to anyone; we belong to the land, and what we do to the land and animals we do to ourselves. For a long time, they have been trying to get the rest of us to wake up and remember that.

I am a white woman who regularly sits in Indigenous spaces to support Indigenous-led grassroots social and environmental justice work. Through observation, I learn. These spaces have taught me that time is running out for the Colonial Paradigm of Control, which provides "freedom of choice" for members of contemporary culture, while marginalizing everyone else. It abuses mountains, waters, animals, and plants, and takes them for granted. It refuses to comprehend *everything* as interdependent and related. It actively ensures rights to economic development and ignores the healing power of relationship. It doesn't take the time to recognize the long-term and far-reaching implications of its actions. When something sacred cracks its controlling demeanor, it ends the meeting and walks away. It does all of this with an attitude of condescension, upholding a mythology that this is "normal."

The Paradigm of Colonial Control is at the root of climate change. It is hurting all of us, because we are all connected. Its mechanistic, individual-centric patterns of consumption and commodification have enabled privileged humans to live far beyond our means. It marginalizes Indigenous communities and communities of Color, who are disproportionately affected by climate change. Since the beginning of the colonial project, the voices and viewpoints of these communities have been suppressed most often and most violently. However, these communities have the expertise to offer much-needed solutions, and they are stepping forward to offer life-affirming alternatives. The question is:

I had just received a taste of the Colonial Paradigm of Control: the mindset confronting Indigenous peoples for over 500 years.



will we have the humility to *listen*?

Artificial snow is being manufactured on the sacred mountain because warming temperatures and reduced precipitation render business less profitable. Sometimes I wonder how our community might have reacted differently to these early warning signs of climate change. What could we have learned from cultural perspectives that value relationship with sacred landscape more than profit and recreation? What might have unfolded in our region, if our institutional policies followed the leadership of the Indigenous cultures that have been living with this land since the beginning? What type of healing could take place if our community were to perceive the kinship teachings of the Mountain herself?

In this time of climate change, plants, animals, insects, and other than human beings are being forced to adapt or perish. We two-legged people need to adapt as well, by changing our worldviews and behaviors. We must respect the Indigenous peoples' understanding of *K'é* to relearn how to get along with each other and the rest of Creation. Those who are settlers on this land could begin by learning our history of colonialism that underpins the current climate crisis. There is still time to embrace what I consider to be the most important adaptation for the well-being of all: respecting our Mother Earth and the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Postscript, April 2020:

Within a few days of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the ski resort closed, in compliance with City of Flagstaff public health regulations. Indigenous Elders of this region often say that abusing sacred sites like *Doko'oost'iid / Nuva'truky'a'ovi / Wiihaagyn-pacha* leads to unpredictable, serious consequences for all life. Instead of viewing the resort's closure as a temporary business decision necessitated by this human health crisis, I regard it as a natural consequence for unbalanced human behavior in relation to a powerful being of kinship. Will our community learn from the changes generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, alter our course, and change "business as usual?" I hope so. 🐦

Thank you to Cora Maxx-Phillips, Shawn Mulford, and Dianna Uqualla for their tireless climate justice advocacy, and for giving input on this article.

Hilary Giovale is a ninth-generation American settler of European descent. Influenced by her relationships with Indigenous peoples, worldviews, movements, and places, she is the author of a forthcoming ethnoautobiography about her process of decolonization. She has been a contributor to Yes! magazine and Dark Matter: Women Witnessing. See her website, www.goodrelative.com, for more information.

How might our community have reacted differently to early warning signs of climate change? What could we have learned from cultural perspectives that value relationship with sacred landscape more than profit and recreation?



Pete Giovale

1. *K'é* signifies the value of kinship in the Diné language.
2. "Key Dates in Arizona Snowbowl History." *Arizona Daily Sun*, March 12, 2007, azdailysun.com/news/key-dates-in-arizona-snowbowl-history/article_86450d83-487a-5ff7-b3c3-b1e973a92b22.html
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4. Granillo, Gabriel. "80 Years of Snowbowl: A history of the innovative and controversial ski resort." *Flag Live*, Feb. 22, 2018, azdailysun.com/flaglive/cover_story/years-of-snowbowl-a-history-of-the-innovative-and-controversial/article_c476a34c-20d5-55a3-86c8-25b00e3522fc.html
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