

POLICING THE PLANET

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8. POLICING THE CRISIS OF INDIGENOUS LIVES: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE RED NATION

Christina Heatherton

The Red Nation is a Native-led council of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists committed to the liberation of Indigenous people and the overthrow of colonialism and capitalism. Based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the council centers Indigenous agendas in direct action, advocacy, mobilization, and education from the perspective of the Indigenous Left. Members Melanie Yazzie (Diné), Nick Estes (Lakota), Sam Gardipe (Pawnee/Sac and Fox), Paige Murphy (Diné), and Chris Banks were interviewed in June 2015.

Heatherton: As of 2014, New Mexico has led the nation with the highest rate of police killings. The Albuquerque Police Department has one of the highest rates of fatal police shootings, eight times as high as the NYPD. Native people are statistically most likely to be killed by law enforcement. How do you explain this violence against Native communities here in New Mexico?

Estes: The Red Nation was partially formed out of the anti-police brutality movement. All of us here were involved in some way. For Native people in Albuquerque, forms of everyday police brutality are largely about the policing of Indigenous bodies in a space. It follows the thinking that Native people don't belong in this space. The police, especially the Albuquerque Police Department, manage the crises of colonialism, colonization, and occupation through the constant criminalization of Indigenous bodies, especially homeless and poor people. Settlement and colonization are never complete processes; they always have to be reenacted. Policing this crisis of Indigenous lives happens in the present and also in the future.

Yazzie: Colonization presumes the disappearance and the finality of settlement, but Indians are ubiquitous. The fact that we're present makes us

anachronisms. We're not supposed to be here, but we're here in really large numbers. That increases the amount of violence necessary to contain us. This violence is not just from the cops, but also from citizens. Last summer two Diné men known as Cowboy and Rabbit were brutally beaten to death. This violence obviously doesn't only affect Native people; other homeless people and poor people of color especially are treated as totally disposable. Native people here experience the violence of anti-Indian common sense as an everyday thing. We call Albuquerque a border town since the city is surrounded by Indigenous land and has a large Indigenous population inside it—55,000 Native people, maybe more. As a border town it's also an important site in the production of anti-Indian common sense.

Heatherton: How do you define anti-Indian common sense?

Yazzie: Nick and I developed the concept by drawing on Dakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, one of the most important scholars in Native American intellectual history in the last forty years. She coined the term “anti-Indianism,” which she defines as “that which treats the Indians and their tribes as if they don't exist.” She also describes it as that which disavows and devalues Indian nationhood—which demonizes and insults being Indian in America. Through the term, we can see how the weight of history is placed upon Native people's shoulders, as if anything bad that has transpired is our own fault.¹

Estes: One way we use anti-Indianism as common sense draws from Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theorist who described “common sense” as an ideology not necessarily actively theorized but more like a knee-jerk response. People don't necessarily think that Indians aren't supposed to exist, it's just normalized in how they perceive their reality. People can celebrate and mourn the passing of the Indian, but they can't actually confront the existence or the persistence of Indigenous life in cities because Indians don't “belong” here.

Heatherton: How do you confront anti-Indian common sense here in Albuquerque?

Gardipe: For the Indian on the street, we don't have a place to actually exist or have social lives and hash things out within the Indian community.

We have a place here that's more or less a tourist attraction with Pueblos. It's basically full of artwork, pottery, and food supposedly made by Natives of the Southwest. However, if a street person walked in, he'd probably be turned away, because he's seen as an embarrassment to Natives. I get a little scrutinized when I walk in there because I have long hair and I'm obviously an Indigenous person, but I'm not a "mainstream Indian." They like to see the ones in suits and ties with short hair.

Heatherton: Your group often uses the term "unnatural deaths" to place the police killings within a larger political economy of extreme poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. How do you understand these connections?

Estes: Private property has more value and sanctity than Native lives. Unnatural deaths result from private property laws that prohibit everyday behavior in public. Whether it's eating, sleeping, defecating, urinating, having an untreated mental illness, for example, these behaviors are all criminalized because they are enacted on somebody else's property. Being unable to sleep, stop, drink, rest, or urinate are forms of what could be considered torture. When Native people enter Gallup or Albuquerque, they're made to stay in constant motion. Because of property laws, they can't loiter, panhandle, sleep in public, or perform basic bodily functions because these are all criminalized behaviors. As a consequence they have to constantly be moving. People walk up to ten or twenty miles a day. Often people can't sleep within the city where they have access to resources such as shelter, food, or other basic needs. They end up going to what people here call "the bush." We've found that a lot of people die as a result of this constant movement and constant policing because they are forced to live outside of society, on the outskirts of the city, while actually depending on the city for life.

An unnatural death can mean anything from dying from exposure, which happens quite frequently, to being beat up by vigilantes or by the police, possibly resulting in some sort of injury that means they can't work and therefore lose their job. It could mean getting their personal identification confiscated and destroyed by the police and losing the ability to work, access to medical services or secure housing. When we talk about unnatural deaths, it can be anything from the extreme forms of violence to the "slow death" of poverty or homelessness that always goes unaccounted for.

Banks: The pervasive view in Albuquerque is that the right place for Native people is on the reservation. If Native people are off the reservation, they seem to have no claim to rights or to citizenship. Police uphold this view that Native people have no rights they are bound to respect. Native people are seen as a disposable part of the population. This is related to the federal government's lack of respect for the sovereignty of Native land, which they view as existing for plunder. In their view, either the Native population will be exploited for their cheap labor or they will be absorbed by prisons. In that way, they have everything in common with other oppressed nations living in the United States, such as African Americans and Latinos. Thinking about them as a disposable part of the population explains their targeting by the police. The *Albuquerque Journal* recently reported that 12 percent of Native adults in Albuquerque experience chronic homelessness, which is a crisis if there ever was one. No one in the city is sounding the alarm or asking how we can mobilize resources to address this.

Murphy: I grew up in a border town in Gallup. It's common to see homeless Natives walking in the street. It's normal to see Natives sleeping on the street. In the news, it's normal to hear about homeless Natives dying due to exposure, especially in the wintertime, Native people freezing to death in the cold. No one really thinks twice about it, because it's an everyday normal thing—the violence that saturates a town like Gallup.

When I see Native people homeless in a town like Gallup, what I see are the failures of capitalism. You've got all of these different failures of capitalism: people who don't have access to jobs, people who don't have access to health care, people who don't have access to education. You just fall into these cracks. I guess you could call them pipelines to incarceration or to homelessness. Gallup is dire and decaying. When you see a town like that, you have to start questioning the system that allowed these things to happen, a system that will turn its back on Natives while they're in these dire circumstances. I see it in my families.

This is why I really like the Red Nation, because we all have these same stories. Every Native person that I meet knows what it's like to have alcoholism rip and tear your family apart. Every Native woman I have ever met has been sexually assaulted. They say that the statistic is three out of four Native women—

Yazzie: One in three.

Murphy: One in three. They say that one in three women are sexually abused in their lifetimes, but it's definitely higher than that. A lot of the Native people I know who have been sexually assaulted don't report it. I didn't report it when it happened to me. These numbers are extremely high. In a town like Gallup, a lot of women go missing. There are thousands of Native women who have gone missing and people don't talk about it. It's not breaking news. None of these problems get any attention. If they were to get attention, then you'd have to say, "Capitalism is failing." Capitalism has always failed Native people.

Yazzie: It's premised on our elimination.

Murphy: Exactly. These circumstances are dire. People are dying every day. Despite the rate of violence, there's no mobilization. No one is going out in the street. People are so used to it that their reaction isn't outrage. My mom tells me, "This is just the way it is. It's always gonna be this way." But by existing, we discredit the system and question the system. That's why I'm involved in the Red Nation.

Heatherton: Like the Black Panther Party, the Red Nation also has a ten-point program. Your fifth point is "an end to the discrimination, persecution, killing, torture, and rape of Native women." Can you say more about how this is central to your program?

Yazzie: I'm an Indigenous feminist. As I'm one of the co-founders of the Red Nation, there was no way this was not going to be in the agenda. That's the simple answer. All of the different subjects that we've included, whether it's LGBTQ2 (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Two-Spirited) people, women, the poor, the youth, and so forth, all of these groups are categories of Indigenous subjects under occupation by the United States that are completely marginalized and silenced. They are marginalized not just by the common sense of settler colonialism but also within Indigenous-led social movements. You never see young people or women or the poor or trans Native people at the helm of these movements. Traditionally, they are very patriarchal and quite sexist forms of social organizing. We are foregrounding these voices not as a simple politics of representation as though we merely needed someone with a uterus. We're feminists. That means we organize ourselves to confront the heteropatriarchy in organizing culture as well as in tribal government

structures. We recognize the logic of heteropatriarchy as a form of violence disproportionately enacted on feminized bodies, whether Native women's bodies, queer bodies, or other Indigenous bodies.

Estes: I've been involved in a lot of environmental movements back home, especially in the anti-Keystone XL Pipeline movement. One thing I find fascinating is how non-Native people gravitate towards Indigenous causes that are "safe." They go to sites of extraction where the exploitation and monetization of nature is comprehensible to them. But capital is also reproduced in urban centers like border towns. Four out of five Native people live in urban centers. What would it mean if those same allies who came out to places they consider "Native spaces" instead came to places that aren't considered Native spaces, like Albuquerque? What if they rallied around us every time a Native trans woman was murdered on the street? Or every time a child was victimized in school? What if they protested every time a woman was violated in some way? If there was that same kind of reaction, in a city or a border town, what would that mean? The reason why Native youth, Native LGBTQ, Native women are central to these struggles is that they are made vulnerable by capital, not just at the sites of extraction, but also at the sites of its reproduction, the urban centers where a majority of Native people live.

Yazzie: Capital is reproduced through colonial violence. If you center the life of a Native trans sex worker, and there are many in Albuquerque, that person will have a subject position that has been reproduced through colonial violence. The logic of capital as it's reproduced through that person, or through a Native woman's body, is going to be so much more visible than when it appears in a white man or in many cases a Native man. In the Red Nation we are forced to talk about all of these forms of violence at the exact same time, because that's literally how people live their lives.

Heatherton: Like the Black Panther Party, your ten-point program also includes a demand for appropriate education, health care, social services, employment, and housing, what you call a "living social wage." How is this demand central to your organizing against capitalist colonialism?

Estes: The first point of our ten-point program is the reinstatement of treaty rights. That's what makes American Indians, Native people, distinct.

Our treaty rights don't begin or end on the reservation boundary. When we cross the reservation boundary, we do not lose our rights. In Albuquerque alone there are 291 reasons why this is important, all based on treaties, because there are 291 federally recognized Native nations living in Albuquerque right now. That is a very powerful thing, politically speaking. Those are 291 guarantees for adequate health care, adequate education, and adequate social services. Those are basic human rights, and they aren't anything new. When we talk about the not-so-sexy battle for health care and education, it's based on treaties. That's where we're drawing our inspiration from when we talk about health care. Police brutality is more mainstream now. It's a really important struggle because of the ways in which we're having this conversation. We also need to do the hard groundwork of guaranteeing that these historic rights and historic obligations are fulfilled to keep a bare minimum of life and dignity for Native people.

Heatherton: The very last line of your ten-point program is “For Native peoples to live, capitalism and colonialism must die.”

All: Yeah!

Banks: The Red Nation came into existence to fill a void. We wanted to provide a vehicle for struggle, to mobilize Native people, and, in a way, to be a catalyst to bring people into motion to fight. Like Paige said, homelessness, lack of access to health care, and poverty are often talked about as irrational outcomes of a rational system. Our perspective is the exact opposite, that these are actually quite rational outcomes of the irrational system that we live in.

This ten-point program, specifically the call for a living social wage, is a programmatic demand that serves the purpose of building into people's consciousness that these are not entitlements or the privileges of the few, but really human rights. We demand and fight for them, but we also believe that the current system will not actually be able to grant them. Our demands and our fighting will expose the system for what it is. They will expose the limits of the “democracy” that we live in and the limits of the capitalist system. That's really our goal.

Yazzie: Native people aren't living if we're living to die. We're produced so that we can reproduce the violence necessary for the accumulation of

capital that is never ours. The capital is for a small group of people. We use the term “meaningful standard of living” in point eight of our tenpoint plan. “Life” is at the root of that point because we mean it. Native people aren’t living. In the capitalist-colonialist system, we are really only born so that we can be churned up, spit out, bludgeoned to death, killed by exposure, ripped apart by dogs, run over by cars, mangled by alcohol, or raped several times in our lives. That’s really what life is like. That’s not living. A meaningful standard of living would be a really basic step to allow Native people to begin to develop enough well-being to mobilize in any sort of way, and to create the kind of change we’re envisioning in the Red Nation. We’re not the kind of activists who say, “Our vision is to end colonialism and capitalism, and the way to do this is to burn down buildings, or whatever.”

Murphy: Really? That’s why I joined.

All: [*Laugh*]

Yazzie: We start where we’re at. Where we’re at sucks. It’s incredibly violent. We want to allow Native people to live and to breathe just a little bit. We’re genuinely interested in mobilizing poor people. We’re a bunch of Marxists. We have a materialist approach, not an idealistic approach. We care about people. If you care about people then you have to deal with the messiness of life.

Estes: An idealized position envisions Native people as living this “authentic” Indigenous life, riding bareback in the mountains with the wind flowing through their hair, herding sheep, and hunting a buffalo, all at the same time. Despite the popular imaginary, four out of five Native people do not live on reservation land. That is a reality we have to confront. Albuquerque is Indigenous space. Gallup is Indigenous space. Rapid City is Indigenous space. The demands for reasonable housing, a living social wage, adequate social services, and adequate health care are not unreasonable. They are very, very reasonable. They are basic human rights that can be fulfilled. This is the richest, most powerful country in the world and it has people living in fourth world conditions. That’s where Indigenous peoples are. To even begin to imagine an alternative future, an alternative to capitalism, an alternative to colonialism, and to facilitate that end, you have to have the ability to live. It’s a future-oriented project. We’re actually continuing a long struggle of Native people and moving it

into the future. We're very progressive in that sense. We also understand that we want to work from the material conditions in which we find ourselves, not some imagined, idealized past where we're riding bareback, herding sheep, and killing buffalo.

Heatherton: All at the same time.

Estes: All at the same time.

Heatherton: You have a wonderful saying that “solidarity is not hard.” Why is this an important organizing principle?

Murphy: The labor movement in the 1930s started off with a program like ours. This was a time of intense struggle. Workers got together. They put a list of demands together, including unemployment benefits and social security. This was really the work of the communists. At the time, people thought that these demands were totally unrealistic. But they won them through intense struggle. When all the workers stand together, it radicalizes people. You're able to see the system in a real way. If workers withhold their labor, then the capitalists have no power. We're materialists. We're Marxists. This program is a starting block to what we're trying to achieve. People may see things like access to education, free health care, social services, unemployment, and think that it will never happen. Through intense struggle and by bringing people out into the streets, we will be able to turn these demands into reality.

Estes: We've all worked in solidarity with Palestine, with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and with other police brutality movements as well. When someone puts out a call, you respond. It's not about serving yourself as an individual. It's about using your body as a vehicle, putting it in the street, or writing a letter, or whatever, and standing behind other oppressed groups of people. I don't know any other way to explain it except that “solidarity is not hard.” Get your shit together and get out there.

Murphy: Now more than ever, people are starting to bridge struggles together. We've done a lot of work around Palestinian solidarity, Muslim solidarity against Islamophobia, and against police brutality. All of these struggles are related. Everyone is fighting capitalism in their day-to-day

lives whether they want to admit it or not. When you're struggling to make rent, you're fighting against capitalism. When you're looking for a job and you can't find one, you're struggling against capitalism. People every day are fighting against capitalism. When we link these struggles, that's when they're able to see it.

Yazzie: Another group we're building right now is Diné Solidarity with Palestine, since you can't end the occupation in Palestine unless you end the occupation of Indigenous land in the US. It's a globalized system of settler colonialism. If we're going to engage in solidarity, we have to center the Indigenous agenda. That's what the Red Nation is about. No one else centers the Indigenous agenda. It always gets lost or marginalized. If we actually center our own agenda and proceed with solidarity efforts from that position, what does that look like? I'm not terribly interested in solidarity paradigms that don't center Indigenous interests or an Indigenous critique of colonialism and capitalism.

Banks: We approach our work by thinking about how our activities can deepen the multinational character of an anti-racist struggle. We don't water down demands for self-determination, we try to raise the consciousness of the broader social justice movement. The Red Nation is trying to fill a vacuum, not just within society but also within the existing social justice movement that only pays lip service to the Native struggle. We're trying to build unity on a much different basis, on a deep understanding of self-determination, and that doesn't contradict in any way the need to build a broad-based, multinational, working-class movement.

Heatherton: Final thoughts?

Estes: Settlement is never a complete process, and we're here to make sure that it never gets completed. Colonization is a failed project, because they didn't kill us all.

Yazzie: That's why they have to constantly police us.

Estes: It's through 500 years of resistance that we have our existence in the present. That's what keeps us going. It's a beautiful thing, as much as it condemns us to this constant struggle. It's something that has to be fought. Otherwise, what did our ancestors die for?

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16 Villa Rodríguez, *Crimen y Criminalidad en Puerto Rico*, 246–7.

17 Karl Ross, “Project Crime Spilling into Tamer Areas,” *San Juan Star*, n.d., 3, 8.

18 “Al que no quiere caldo,” *El Nuevo Día*, August 22, 1993, 3.

19 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), xv.

8. Policing the Crisis of Indigenous Lives: An Interview with the Red Nation

1 Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: A Voice from Tatekeya’s Earth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), x.

9. Policing Place and Taxing Time on Skid Row

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2 Tom Hayden, “Dismantling the Myth of Bill Bratton’s LAPD,” *The Nation*, December 6, 2013.

3 Berkeley Law Policy Advocacy Clinic, “California’s New Vagrancy Laws: The Growing Enactment and Enforcement of Anti-Homeless Laws in the Golden State,” February 2015, 6, available at law.berkeley.edu.

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7 Richard Winton and Cara Mia DiMassa, “Skid Row Cleanup Is Challenged,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 2007.

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10 Heather Timmons, “A Fatal Police Shooting Shows How the ‘Safer Cities’ Initiative in Los Angeles Failed Skid Row,” *Quartz*, March 2, 2015.

11 Berkeley Law Policy Advocacy Clinic, “California’s New Vagrancy Laws,” 28; George Lipsitz, “In an Avalanche, Every Snowflake Pleads Not Guilty”: The Collateral