A colonized COP: Indigenous exclusion and youth climate justice activism at the United Nations climate change negotiations

Corrie Grosse  
*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, cgrosse@csbsju.edu*

Brigid Mark  
*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, BMARK001@CSBSJU.EDU*

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/environmental_studies_pubs

Part of the [Climate Commons](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/ClimateCommons), [Environmental Sciences Commons](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/EnvironmentalSciencesCommons), and the [Indigenous Studies Commons](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/IndigenousStudiesCommons)

**Recommended Citation**


A colonized COP: Indigenous exclusion and youth climate justice activism at the United Nations climate change negotiations

Corrie Grosse and Brigid Mark

Youth activists around the world are demanding urgent climate action from elected leaders. The annual United Nations climate change negotiations, known as COPs, are key sites of global organizing and hope for a comprehensive approach to climate policy. Drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviews at COP25 in 2019, this research examines youth climate activists’ priorities, frustrations and hopes for creating just climate policy. Youth are disillusioned with the COP process and highlight a variety of ways through which the COP perpetuates colonial power structures that marginalize Indigenous peoples and others fighting for justice. This is intersectional exclusion — the character of exclusion experienced by people with multiple intersecting marginalized identities. We demonstrate that the space, policies, and even the social movement organizing at COP25 are exclusive, necessitating new ways of negotiating, building relationships, and imagining climate solutions that centre Indigenous communities, and protect and return to them the lands on which they depend. As the youth climate justice movement grows, attending to Indigenous priorities will help it transform, rather than reinforce, the systems at the root of climate crisis and to challenge existing policymaking structures.

Keywords: climate justice, colonization, decolonization, Indigenous peoples, youth, UN climate negotiations, activism, intersectional exclusion

1 INTRODUCTION

There is a growing movement of youth across the globe engaged in school strikes for the climate, fossil fuel divestment, and direct action to protect their homes, land, livelihoods, and cultures. While many of these young leaders, often Indigenous, people of colour, and from the Global South, have been doing this work for years, the movement has only recently gained widespread attention due to media coverage of Greta Thunberg, who, since August 2018 at 15 years of age, has been skipping school to call for urgent action to address the climate crisis. These youth movements leverage the idea of intergenerational justice: that youth hold a legitimate claim to a livable future. Among some Indigenous activists, this claim is also conceptualized in terms of thinking and acting for the wellbeing of seven generations, a philosophy often traced to the oral constitution of the Haudenosaunee.1 In the realm of United Nations policy, intergenerational justice is framed as the need to ‘protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind’.2

The principal process for policy makers to advance intergenerational justice with regard to climate crisis is the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).3 At this conference, world leaders and members of civil society convene to curb carbon emissions through reviewing the implementation of the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and, since 2015, the Paris Agreement. Youth, civil society, and especially

1. The Haudenosaunee was an alliance of six Indigenous nations more commonly known as the Iroquois Confederacy; Jacqueline P. Hand, ‘Protecting the seventh generation: Saginaw Chippewa tribe serves as natural resources trustee’ (2004) 83 Michigan Bar Journal 28; Winona LaDuke, All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life (Haymarket Books 1999); Oren Lyons, Exiled in the land of the free: democracy, the Indian nations, and the U.S. Constitution (1st edn, Clear Light Publishers 1992)
3. 31 ILM (1992), 849 (entered into force. 21 March 1994)
Indigenous peoples have nominal seats at the COP table. These groups are recognized as ‘constituencies’ who may speak at the opening and closing plenaries of the conference, but beyond that, their participation in the negotiations is curtailed through formal and informal methods. Despite its limited accessibility, this conference has become a stage for action of youth and other activists in the climate justice movement. It is a key ‘movement building’ site where activists meet colleagues from around the world, share stories of oppression, triumph and hope, and work to demand climate justice in global policy outcomes.

Providing a case study of COP25, held in Madrid in December 2019, this article draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 22 youth activists to assess the state of play of the youth climate justice movement at the dawn of a new decade — the final decade, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), during which humanity can avert climate catastrophe. We find that exclusion was the dominant experience of youth activists both within COP25 and activist spaces themselves, an experience that was heightened for Indigenous peoples and for individuals with multiple intersecting marginalized identities. This is intersectional exclusion.

While climate crisis and youth-led movements gained media attention around the world, policy makers in their global negotiating rooms paid little heed to youth demands for rapid ambitious climate action; the talks were unable to reach consensus in many areas, pushing decisions to 2020. Youth questioned the utility of the COP, characterizing it as an exclusive space bent on reinforcing the capitalist colonial heteropatriarchal norms and systems at the root of climate crisis.

In this article, we elevate the perspectives of youth activists; detail the exclusive nature of both COP25 and youth climate justice organizing; and highlight youth ideas for increasing the meaningful involvement of, and leadership by, Indigenous peoples in youth climate justice organizing and COP. We argue that the exclusive characteristics of COP perpetuate colonial power structures and that ideas for enhancing meaningful involvement, when put into practice, are important for protecting and returning Indigenous self-determination over their lands and cultures: both valuable steps toward decolonization.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The climate justice movement

The atmosphere is an ecological commons. Climate justice demands that this commons not be enclosed by a handful of polluters. Climate justice also demands that people be compensated for the impact of climate chaos caused by the actions of others. But above all, climate justice demands that every person, every community, every society have the freedom to create and defend economies that cause no harm to the climate or to other people.
The climate justice movement builds on grassroots traditions often led by black, Indigenous, and people of colour resisting legacies of colonialism and enslavement (see Figure 1) and focuses on climate debt as a key organizing arena. Climate debt is two-fold:

1. An ‘emissions debt’ — amassed by rich countries from their excessive consumption of the limited atmospheric space: they have left almost no space for developing countries to increase their greenhouse gas emissions if climate change is to be contained. […]

2. An ‘adaptation debt’ — through their emissions, rich countries have disproportionately contributed to the impacts of climate change being felt by developing countries.  

In order to resolve this inequity, the Indigenous Environmental Network suggests that ‘industrialized society must redefine its relationship with the sacredness of Mother Earth’ by keeping fossil fuels in the ground, demanding real solutions, compelling industrialized-developed countries to take responsibility, and living in a ‘good way’ on mother earth. These are central values and goals

---

9. Hilary Moore and Joshua Kahn Russell, *Organizing Cools the Planet: Tools and Reflections to Navigate the Climate Crisis* (PM Press 2011)
of the climate justice movement.\textsuperscript{12} Addressing this debt requires a restorative approach: ‘the environmental space of the developing countries must be returned, “decolonized”’.\textsuperscript{13}

\subsection*{2.2 Climate crisis, colonialism, and decolonization}

The modes of production and consumption in the global economy that caused the climate crisis and other forms of environmental exploitation have depended upon the subordination of peoples in the Global South, and of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and people of colour everywhere. Those who benefit from this economy obscure these connections:

most of us have been trained to avoid a systemic and historical analysis of capitalism and to divide pretty much every crisis our system produces — from economic inequality to violence against women to white supremacy to unending wars to ecological unraveling — in walled-off silos.\textsuperscript{14}

Key to this mode of production and consumption is the ongoing process of colonialism. For non-Indigenous climate justice activists (especially those, like the authors, living among the pipeline battles in North America), the connections between climate crisis and colonization have become increasingly clear in the last decade — something that Indigenous peoples have always known. Indigenous world views have long been ‘concerned with a world that privatizes the air, water and commodifies the sacredness of Mother Earth’.\textsuperscript{15}

For many Indigenous communities, relationship and responsibility to the more-than-human world are inextricably linked to identity, culture and survival. The destruction of these eco-social relationships by redistributing land, privatizing, polluting and renaming it without input or consent from the original inhabitants\textsuperscript{16} can tear apart the sociocultural fabric of Indigenous communities, exacting ‘slow violence’ that does not catch headlines or inspire rapid policy change.\textsuperscript{17} Bacon calls this unique form of violence against Indigenous peoples ‘colonial ecological violence’.\textsuperscript{18}

Climate change exacerbates colonial ecological violence because it forecloses the ‘possibility of relationships with and responsibilities to ecologies’, and contributes to ‘physical, emotional, economic, and cultural harms’ inflicted upon Indigenous peoples, communities who are affected first and worst by climate crisis.\textsuperscript{19} To ensure that responses to climate change do not perpetuate colonial ecological violence, Indigenous voices, ways of living, and ways of imagining the future, must be front and centre in policy and change-making efforts at all levels. This type of decision making around climate is an important step toward decolonization.

Tuck and Yang define decolonization as returning land to Indigenous peoples, cautioning against the use of the term as a metaphor for social justice.\textsuperscript{20} Living in a ‘good way’ that would

\begin{itemize}
\item Paul Chatterton, David Featherstone and Paul Routledge, ‘Articulating Climate Justice in Copenhagen: Antagonism, the Commons, and Solidarity’ (2013) 45 Antipode 602; Moore and Russell, \textit{Organizing Cools the Planet: Tools and Reflections to Navigate the Climate Crisis}
\item Rikard Warlenius, 'Decolonizing the Atmosphere: The Climate Justice Movement on Climate Debt' (2017) 27 The Journal of Environment & Development 131
\item Naomi Klein, 'The Battle Lines Have Been Drawn on the Green New Deal.' \textit{The Intercept} (13 February 2019)
\item David Naguib Pellow, ‘Climate Disruption in the Global South and in African American Communities: Key Issues, Frameworks, and Possibilities for Climate Justice’ (White Paper, The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Washington D.C. 2012)
\item J. M. Bacon, 'Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and The Production of Colonial Ecological Violence' (2018) 5 Environmental Sociology 1
\item Rob Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor} (Harvard University Press 2011)
\item Bacon, 'Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and The Production of Colonial Ecological Violence' 59
\item Ibid, 19
\item Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor' (2012) 1 Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1
\end{itemize}
advance decolonization requires rejecting false solutions that fail to address the root causes of the climate crisis such as proposals and programs for nuclear energy, ‘clean’ coal, carbon trading, and the World Bank-led REDD+ forest policy. These false solutions do not respect the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous communities, as required by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous of 2007, and are constructed within systems that assume that economic growth is desireable, that Western science and technology can solve any problem, and that markets will spur climate-friendly innovation and motivation. As the Indigenous Environmental Network explains, these solutions are ‘intrinsically linked to energy markets that remain inextricably intertwined with brutal extraction, exploitation, colonialism, racism, sexism, and ecological destruction’. To challenge these market-based frameworks that view the Earth as a dead, mechanistic entity to be dominated by humans, we must de-colonize the atmosphere by centreing the needs of Indigenous peoples. This requires attention to the histories and current status of Indigenous peoples, land and colonialism. This is not only just, but also strategic, as Indigenous peoples have practices and knowledge that will be critical for embarking on what LaDuke (referring to the Anishinaabe prophecy of Seven Fires) calls the ‘green path’ to a local, renewable, and just economy and world. As Whyte explains, ‘climate change presents the need for excavation and reassessment of what a recognition of climate change portends for those who have endured a century of immense cultural, political and environmental changes’. Kera Sherwood-O’Reagan, an Indigenous youth with disabilities, echoed this point in her closing statement at COP25, also emphasizing the need for attention to intersectionality, the understanding that intersecting social identities shape how people experience privilege and oppression:

Since the colonial project began, we have been overcoming an apocalypse on our lands; this has embedded patriarchy, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, white supremacy and systemic oppressions...
in our national and international mechanisms. When you silence us, you deny yourselves learning from our ways and you continue to sideline those who have real solutions for all communities.31

Fortunately, Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth climate justice activists, who are more diverse and connected than ever before, are already having conversations about decolonization and linking fights for true self-determination with fights for climate justice. While interviewees’ ideas for supporting indigenous leadership and meaningful involvement are not always linked to Tuck and Yang’s definition of decolonization as the return of land, they are important steps toward building spaces, policies, and organizing cultures that support decolonization.

2.3 Youth climate justice activists

As people whose entire lives are, and will be, shaped by climate crisis, youth have a unique positionality in the climate justice movement. Unlike previous generations, many are learning about climate change in school and growing up with it as a daily part of life, due to the environmental changes and traumas they experience and/or the media coverage they see. Young people have been leaders in social movements throughout history, and it is no different for the climate justice movement.

While youth have always been engaged in the UN climate negotiations,32 relatively little scholarship focuses on youth in the climate justice movement or at the COP specifically. In the United States (US) and Canada, youth climate justice activists prioritize inclusion and access, intersectionality, community, and relational organizing,33 rejecting ‘normalized, racialized, colonial and patriarchal dynamics in their groups’.34 Among more ‘radical’ members of the global youth climate justice movement who participated in COP19, Foran, Gray and Grosse35 document comparable priorities. These authors show that a shared sense of urgency, understanding of injustice, lived experience under climate crisis, and social movement networks can come together to enable activists to bridge divides in how to respond to the climate crisis, divides that also manifest in policy discussions. This unity occurred when youth led a large coalition of civil society organizations to walkout of COP19 in protest against the corporate capture of the negotiations and lack of progress in the negotiations.36 Thew and others’ longitudinal work at COP demonstrates shifts in UK-based youth climate activists’ conceptualization of justice from intergenerational (often focused on future risks) to intragenerational issues (focused on oppression experienced by marginalized groups in the present).37 Our article focuses on the outcome of this shift, detailing youth’s perspectives on intragenerational justice with particular reference to Indigenous peoples. Ultimately,

31. WEDO, ‘People Power: Closing Statements at COP25’ (2019); see also Whyte, ‘Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene’
33. Corrie. Grosse, ‘Climate Justice Movement Building: Values and Cultures of Creation in Santa Barbara, California’ (2019) 8 Social Sciences 1
36. Ibid
37. Harriet Thew, Lucie Middlemiss and Jouni Paavola, ‘“Youth is not a political position”: Exploring justice claim-making in the UN Climate Change Negotiations’ (2020) 61 Global Environmental Change 102036
youth at both the grassroots and global levels are crafting diverse acts of dissent\textsuperscript{38} that buoy their spirits—producing a critical antidote to climate anxiety—and contributing to building climate just futures.

Enhancing our understanding of this movement, its commitments, and aspirations for the future, this article explores youth perspectives at COP25. In the analysis below, we focus on youth’s ideas and actions surrounding the intersection of colonialism and climate crisis, and of decolonization and climate justice.

3 METHODS

This research is based on participant observation and 22 in-depth interviews with youth activists at the COP25 to the UNFCCC in Madrid, Spain in December 2019. Interviewees included panelists, leaders of actions and demonstrations, participants in YOUNGO, the youth constituency at COP, and participants in the alternative, activist COP, La Cumbre Social Por El Clima, held at a nearby university. With ages ranging from 19 to 30, interviewees represented 17 different organizations. As participant observers, we attended presentations and panels hosted by or featuring youth, daily YOUNGO spokes council meetings, and participated in civil society actions inside and outside COP that occurred from December 9-13\textsuperscript{th}, the second week of the negotiations, recording field notes focused on youth organizing dynamics and inclusion.

The interviews, conducted as ‘conversations with a purpose\textsuperscript{40}, explored five themes: youth’s journeys to activism, their assessment of COP, their understanding of climate justice, their assessment of the youth climate justice movement, the role of gender and colonization in the movement, and their hopes for the future. Interviews ranged from 12 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes, with a median length of 26 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed and coded. Identifying emergent themes from the interviews, we co-created a list of core codes and then added more as we identified new themes in the data. We both coded each interview and reviewed each other’s coding to ensure consistency, using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti to organize transcripts and codes. We employed grounded theory to develop our analysis from the data. We also took photos and videos, recorded and then coded audio from events we attended, and analyzed online videos of events we were unable to attend. Unless otherwise noted, all photos in this article were taken by us. Collectively, we have attended and conducted interviews with youth at three previous COP: COP24, COP23 and COP19.

As young Global North women who identify as scholar activists and as members of the climate justice movement, our positionality informed our research methodology and our analysis. We are both educated, cis-gender, white, and of European descent, residing in the United States. As young people anxious about our own futures within climate crisis, we could approach youth interviewees as youth. As learners and activists, we could express our interest in youth perspectives as being of a scholarly and practical nature—we wanted to understand how youth experiences and expertise can strengthen the climate justice movement and enhance scholars’ understandings of the latest wave of collective action around the climate crisis. As activist women engaged with Indigenous


\textsuperscript{40} Robert Burgess, ‘Methods of Field Research 2: Interviews as Conversations’, In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research (Macmillan 1984)
allies in pipeline resistance in Anishinaabe and Dakota territories in the United States, we are also interested in how issues of gender and decolonization manifest within global movement spaces.

4 COP25

As we participated in COP25 in 2019, climate activism, particularly youth activism, appeared to be at an all-time high, paralleling the urgency of the climate crisis. Coverage in the mainstream media was increasingly common and, among youth, a sense of empowerment was growing. In this context, we and other climate justice activists gathered in Madrid, Spain for two weeks of negotiations around the implementation of the Paris Agreement. 26,706 people attended COP25.41

Madrid, however, was not where COP was supposed to be. About a month before the negotiations were set to begin, protests erupted in Santiago, Chile, the original host of COP25. First sparked by an increase in subway fares, the protests quickly mushroomed into expressions of deep-seated discontent about economic inequality. Soon after, Chilean president Sebastian Piñera cancelled the COP and Madrid stepped in to fill the void. The change in venue at such short notice was unprecedented and presented huge challenges for participants. Countless Indigenous and local Chilean people lost their ability to participate, European youth activists sailing across the Atlantic found themselves with insufficient time to return, and others had to figure out how to pay for airline change fees.

In Madrid, the COP took place in a large conference centre partitioned by temporary walls for presentations and floored with industrial carpet-covered cold cement. Within these spaces, formally organized constituencies representing groups such as youth (YOUNGO), women (the Women and Gender Constituency), and indigenous peoples (IPO), held daily meetings to strategize interventions and to update their respective communities on the negotiations. Beyond their place in the daily schedule, constituencies were most visible in their two-minute speaking slots at the opening and closing plenaries of the COP. Constituencies are composed of members of civil society who apply for badges that allow them to enter the ‘blue zone’ or formal space of the COP, but not many of the ‘closed door’ negotiations where the seminal decisions are made. Badges are allocated to observer organizations such as non-governmental organizations, faith groups, and universities.

Alongside meeting rooms for constituencies and ‘side events’ (panel presentations around specific themes, primarily organized by civil society, non-profit organizations), country pavilions filled the cavernous rooms of the venue. The most creative pavilions featured food, art installations, and free stuff for attendees (items that embodied cultural pride) as well as spaces for country-hosted presentations. Eight Global South countries or regions, compared with 13 Global North countries or regions, were represented by pavilions, which were clearly expensive to construct and which were staffed for two weeks. Outside and adjacent to the COP was a publicly accessible (with registration of identification documents) ‘green zone’, full of educational information.

This is the space of the COP, similar to previous venues, in which climate justice activists from around the world convened in 2019.

5 A COLONIZED COP

Clearly, if you sit in this space, Indigenous people are the most impacted, people from small island nations, but who gets to make the decision at the global level? It's not them.

41. UNFCCC, Provisional List of Registered Participants, 2019

An important theme from our interviews and observations at COP25 was the exclusion of civil society in general and of indigenous peoples in particular. Civil society — into which Indigenous peoples and nations are often lumped, ignoring their self-determination — is excluded from the negotiations themselves. This means that protest is one of the primary ways by which members of civil society and Indigenous communities try to communicate with negotiators. Protest, however, is tightly regulated by the COP conveners: activists must submit protest plans, complete with all of the materials and words on materials that they will use, to the UNFCCC secretariat 24 hours in advance of an action. The secretariat can then modify the protest plans; for example, it insisted that youth highlighting the European Union’s lack of ambition in climate policy — that, like all climate inaction, exacerbates climate impacts on Indigenous communities and their land — should conduct the protest silently so as not to disturb side panels and plenaries (see Figure 2).

Fig. 2 Quietly narrated action by EU youth.

If civil society does not get prior approval, or diverges from the approved plan, protest participants risk being debadged and losing their ability to enter the COP and, in severe cases, will be barred from future COPs. The fear of being debadged is especially limiting for young people who are attending their first COP and do not want to jeopardize their future engagement with the process or upset the organizations that gave them their badges. Jolien Moltz, who helped coordinate the Human Rights and Climate Change Working Group at COP25, summed up interviewees’ sentiments: ‘if you’re a civil society [member] ... you know you’ll be disappointed when you’re here. So you have to set yourself up for that. … you can only sort of keep trying, keep wishing and see’. 42

42. Interview, 12 December 2019
Within the group labeled ‘civil society’, Indigenous peoples are excluded the most. The exclusion of Indigenous voices through the location, language, and use of space means that their demands remain unrepresented in policy making, leading to climate inaction and false solutions which facilitate colonial ecological violence. Our interviewees dub the practices and spaces exclusive to Indigenous peoples ‘colonized’, as they ultimately lead to policies that directly disrupt Indigenous self-determination and relation with the land.

Colonialism depends upon interlocking oppressive social relations such as white supremacy, capitalism, cis-heteropatriarchy, and anthropocentrism which converge to create and maintain elite power, ultimately facilitating the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the negation of their self-determining capacities. These interlocking oppressions mean that perspectives from queer Indigenous folks, youth, and those from the Global South are ignored, as our interviewees describe below. This is intersectional exclusion, a term which highlights the differential experience of oppression based on intersecting identities. Colonialism, fed by intersectional exclusion, works to ensure that COP25 is heavily biased towards Western, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal ways of understanding and imagining solutions to climate change that repress Indigenous perspectives.

Whilst there is a plethora of international human rights and environmental law that might ostensibly suggest otherwise, it is through the practice of international governance, such as at the COPs, that the reality of how law materializes is experienced, often diverging so from its lofty rhetoric.

In the following sections, we analyze exclusion in three areas: (1) the space in which the COP occurs, (2) the negotiations and resulting policies and (3) within the civil society or activist sphere.

5.1 Colonized space

I haven’t felt very welcome here in COP. I came here to try to share our stories and share what we’re going through in our communities, but when I got here, I realized, [I’m] constantly reminded of how powerless we can feel in colonial spaces, you know, a colonial country.

— Big Wind, Northern Arapaho Tribal Member — Turtle Island, interview 12 December 2019

5.1.1 Location

43. Bacon, ‘Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and The Production of Colonial Ecological Violence’
44. Had COP25 taken place in Chile, it would have occurred in a settler colonial context in which colonists made a home out of lands already home to Indigenous peoples. See Kyle Powys Whyte, ‘The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and U.S. Colonialism’ (2017) 19.1 Red Ink: An International Journal of Indigenous Literature, Arts, & Humanities 154 for a useful discussion of settler colonialism. The policies shaped in Madrid, such as false solutions and inaction which facilitate colonial ecological violence, are more neocolonial in nature, as control of distant lands is exerted through indirect economic mechanisms. Further disentangling of different forms of colonial relationships is beyond the scope of this paper. See Robert Young, Postcolonialism: an historical introduction (Blackwell Publishers 2001) for a good overview of these relationships.
45. Glen Sean Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks : Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition (University of Minnesota Press 2014)
While COPs are supposed to rotate host locations around the world each year, COP25 became the third of four COPs in a row to be hosted in Europe, limiting access for many people from the Global South. The move from Chile to Spain — a symbolic shift from a colonized country to a colonizer country that interviewees found ironic — severely limited the COP’s accessibility, meaning, and inclusivity, particularly for Indigenous peoples. Big Wind joined the first all-Indigenous SustainUS delegation with the intention of ‘going to meet with other Indigenous people on Indigenous land to talk about our voices on Indigenous lands for Indigenous people.’ Instead, they found themselves traveling to a place with comparatively little presence of Indigenous people.

5.1.2 Language

Access to COP is limited for non-English speakers, the dominant negotiation language. Despite the attempt to provide real-time translations, translators are not present in all spaces, and translations are often inadequate and inaccurate. The majority of protest actions at COP are in English without translators. Even at La Cumbre Social, which aimed to create an alternate, activist space, distinct from COP, translations were not high quality, reproducing COP’s flaws. For those who do not speak English, the ubiquitous technical terms and abbreviations can make the COP process and policies inaccessible. Jolien lamented, ‘sometimes [you have] absolutely no clue what is going on because it’s just a confusing space. They [the system—which Jolien calls patriarchy—creating the norms in this space] try to confuse you pretty much with everything, abbreviations, processes, everything.’ Complicated technical terms and tedious bureaucracy confused or alienated many first-time COP attendees.

Indigenous languages often carry within them values, knowledge systems and worldviews which have no analogous concepts in English, a language that imposes its own values, knowledge systems, and worldviews. English ‘takes the sacredness out of everything’, limiting full engagement with Indigenous perspectives. COP language does not understand the ‘stresses’ and ‘traumas’ of leaving behind ancestors and land to which a person is deeply connected. Language such as ‘keystone species’, ‘ecosystem services’ and ‘natural capital’ represent Western and commodity-oriented thinking that elevates colonizing worldviews: ‘it’s like that mindset that … we are separate from nature … that we’re not a part of it at all.’ Indigenous views of the more-than-human world as ‘relatives’ and of humans as a part of nature are very different from the assumptions embedded in most policies proposed at COP, which entail control and domination of nature in order to promote economic growth.

The lack of urgency in COP language and atmosphere exacerbates these problems, inhibiting focus on the human dimensions of climate crisis. Interviewees were frustrated with negotiators debating one word for hours and hours on minor technical points while people’s lives are being affected by the climate crisis.

48. Interview, 12 December 2019
49. Interview, 12 December 2019
50. Interview with Big Wind
51. Interview with Tamani Rarama; Panel ‘Voices of the Youth: Claiming, Achieving and Advancing Climate Justice in the Pacific,’ Madrid, Spain, 10 December 2019
52. Interview with Big Wind
53. ibid
54. Annie Booth, 'We are the Land: Native American Views of Nature' (2003) Nature Across Cultures 329
55. Interview with Tamani Rarama
56. Interview with Genevieve Jiva, 11 December 2019; Interview with Maryann Puia and Belyndar Rikimani, 9 December 2019
in 30- or 40-years’ time, Tuvalu might be under the waters… It’s not just about where we are going to live, but it’s also our loss of identity, our cultures and our traditions that are embedded in our land because we hold it very sacred to us. … and the people are still debating on what to put in the paragraph.57

5.1.3 Space

Even outside of the formal negotiations process, Indigenous peoples were pushed to the margins. The Indigenous Pavilion was a tiny space in the green zone with about twenty chairs. When the pavilion opened on the first day, Indigenous peoples couldn’t fit: ‘we had to argue with UNFCCC. Like we cannot fit in this space. There’s hundreds of us’.58 The pavilion’s location in the green zone made it accessible to people without badges, but also meant that many COP attendees did not become aware of its presence until part way through the negotiations. Lack of an online schedule for the pavilion’s events further limited its accessibility.

Indigenous peoples were also marginalized by allocated speaking times. At the December 10 high-level segment, representatives of each nation, intergovernmental organization (IGO), and non-governmental organization (NGO) were granted the opportunity to issue a statement on behalf of their group. The segment began at 9:00am, but the Indigenous Peoples Organization did not speak until around 9:00pm, at which time all but a few other group representatives had left.

When granted space or time, Indigenous peoples were often tokenized. Fridays for Future organized a 500,000 people march on December 6 and Indigenous peoples were asked to be at the front for pictures. Organizers, however, only invited one Indigenous person to speak for three minutes at the end of the event. Even though youth climate justice activists recognized the importance of diversity, meaningful involvement was neglected. There is a difference between ‘ensuring people have the capacity to engage well and not just ticking a box to say they came’.59

A final way in which the space of the COP reinforced colonial oppression is through constraints on the behaviours, actions, and presentations of attendees. When Indigenous youth held a side event at the pavilion of the World Wildlife Fund, they began to sing in the tradition of their cultures, rather than to present in a typical panel or lecture format. They were surprised when COP authorities informed them that they were conducting an unsanctioned protest, and that they needed to stop singing. The group continued the event because, as Big Wind put it, ‘that’s all we know and that’s what we know. And like those songs — this place needs healing’.

Singing was central to Indigenous youth’s attempts to heal the energy of COP, which many interviewees described as cold and sterile, like a vacuum sucking the energy out of everyone.60 Big Wind felt that metaphysical beings were waging war against one another within the COP space, thriving off of negative emotions and despair. The space itself was large and overwhelming, just like the crisis it was built to address. It was not particularly comfortable or accommodating, with insufficient places for people to sit outside the event rooms and a maze-like set up. Long hours, little sleep, and lots of work, following capitalistic ideals of productivity, left COP attendees drained, leading Tamani to recommend a well-being area to address the COP’s negative effect on mental

57. Interview with Maryann Puia and Belyndar Rikimani
58. Interview with Big Wind
59. Interview with Genevieve Jiva
60. Interview with Big Wind
health. When added together, these factors made participating in COP feel ‘like running a marathon’.

5.2 Colonized policies

Your commitments to patriarchy, capitalism, militarism, colonialism, racism, and ecocide are the only ones you have made and which you support with real finance.

- Jolien Moltz Representing the Women’s and Gender Constituency in the COP25 Closing Plenary, 14 December 2019

Negotiations and the policies they produce constituted a second sphere within COP that reinforced colonization. The COP25 agenda focused on how to implement or finalize the ‘rulebook’ for Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which establishes market-based approaches (i.e. carbon markets and credits) to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Market-based solutions that commodify the environment harm Indigenous communities and fail to address the root causes of climate change.

First-time COP participant Tonja Justsen summed up COP25 as ‘you feel like you’re banging your head against a wall’. The COP25 was the longest COP ever, going over scheduled time by nearly two days due to negotiators’ pedantic adherence to formalities and lack of ability to reach consensus. Interviewees were overwhelmingly disappointed. Annika Kruse expressed her frustration with the lack of urgency surrounding COP25, even before it began: ‘when we say in advance it is unimportant, we waste another year that we don’t have’. Kaime Silvestre Silva recounted, ‘I was expecting more of our leaders. This is more a network place to make business agreements’. While COP21 concluded with a fully developed treaty, COP25 had very little to show at the end of two weeks.

One reason for the failure of COP25 was the consensus process that prevents those most affected by climate crisis from enacting appropriately ambitious and urgent policies. Global North countries such as the United States routinely hold up the negotiations by refusing to agree to terms that they deem to be unfavourable to economic growth. Tamani wondered, ‘…for America, why the hell are they still in this process when they’re getting out of the Paris Agreement? Like how is that just for everybody, particularly small island countries?’ Even had the negotiators reached agreement, the market-based mechanisms they were supposed to be finalizing ignore the need for the Global North to stop over-consuming and to keep fossil fuels in the ground. These mechanisms merely create opportunities for profit, perpetuating capitalism—a system fundamentally incapable of just climate action and structurally beneficial to colonizer nations.

61. Interview, 11 December 2019
62. Interview with Gabriela Baesse, 12 December 2019
64. Interview, 13 December 2019
65. Interview, 12 December 2019. Kruse describes the general perception among activists that countries view COPs in between major milestones, like the Paris Agreement and the deadline for revised NDCs in 2020, as unimportant or lacking in urgency.
66. Interview, 13 December 2019
67. Interview, 11 December 2019
68. See Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate who argues globalized capitalism demands constant growth and deregulation while responding to climate change requires government action and an end to growth; See also Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, 'What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism' (2010) 61 Monthly Review 1
The COP negotiations also reinforce hetero-patriarchy, another system that paved the way for colonialism and that reinforces Western hegemony. Jolien attributes the ‘close[d] off’ nature of the negotiations, their accompanying confusing abbreviations and processes, and the UN’s non-fluid definition of gender as a man/woman binary, to patriarchy. Following decades of research by feminist scholars in the area of gender and development, global policy has come to recognize the importance of ‘gender mainstreaming’, assessing policy implications for different genders. The conceptualization of gender mainstreaming and how it is practiced, however, means the mainstreaming of women’s issues, treatment of gender as a binary and extremely limited discussion of sexuality. Gender Day at COP25, for example, included no formal discussion on LGBTQ+ issues beyond a few queer panelists pointing out the absence of queer representation in delegations and policy discussions, despite the disproportionate effects of climate crisis on this community.

These policy discussions around markets and gender binaries reflect a deeper colonized way of thinking and being that is linear, anthropocentric, hierarchical, and wedded to business as usual. Some of these colonized ways of thinking and organizing were present in movement circles as well, jeopardizing the ability to build the broad-based movement of movements that climate justice activists seek.

5.3 Colonized organizing

Greta Thunberg’s fame is a stark example of the risk of perpetuating colonized systems within the climate justice movement. While Thunberg’s actions have inspired millions of people around the world, and many of our interviewees appreciated the attention and urgency she has brought to the climate crisis, our interviewees pointed out that the myopic focus on Thunberg can lead the media to ignore countless youth with more marginalized identities who have been doing similar work for years with little recognition. Tamani’s words synthesized what many interviewees were feeling:

We [Indigenous youth] have never been heard…. because of who we are … our skin color or the context we come from. And then it takes a white girl to raise —I mean, it’s incredible, this movement … — and I know she’s passionate about it…. But you can see clearly where the biasedness is with like media particularly and what kind of story they want to document, who they want to document… They don’t want to see the smaller numbers who are directly impacted. They want to see all European young people who are now engaged in this.

69. For example, settler colonialism has disposessed women of their land and community membership through legislation founded in patrilineal descent (see Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition), attacked the nonheteronormative and nonheteropatriarchal cultures of Native peoples in an attempt to facilitate their erasure, and attempted to undermine the power of Native women and Two-Spirits perceived as a threat (see Cutcha Risling Baldy, We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women’s Coming-of-Age Ceremonies (University of Washington Press 2018)).

70. Climate crisis disproportionately affects LGBTQ+ individuals by exacerbating their marginalized position in society. At COP25, several LGBTQ+ youth from Fiji described how when a cyclone or hurricane hits their islands, LGBTQ+ folks often cannot access evacuation centers because of discrimination. For example, evacuation centers separate people into men and women, excluding nonbinary individuals; communities also often blame the cyclone on God’s wrath against LGBTQ+ lifestyles. For a concise overview of how climate crisis affects the LGBTQ community, see Gaard, 'Out of The Closets and into the Climate' (2009).


72. Interview, 11 December 2019
The focus on Thunberg and European youth has also not translated into action, as is evidenced by the lack of just climate policy emerging at COP. As Peter Loewi explained, ‘Greta also says that no one’s listening. So people want to sit down with her but then do absolutely nothing that she says’.  

Security treatment of Thunberg, compared to Global South and Indigenous people, clearly illustrated the potential for rifts in the movement. One morning, as we waited in line for a Thunberg press conference, which was later closed to civil society, all heads suddenly turned as Thunberg, surrounded by about thirty black-clad security personnel, walked briskly by. This protective treatment of Thunberg contrasted with how security treated Global South and Indigenous folks: ‘[Thunberg was] escorted in here by police. Yesterday Indigenous people were pushed out by police. Continuously, we’re not meant for these spaces, and European voices are held on a pedestal’.  

Our interviewees spoke of multiple instances where Indigenous peoples were barred entry to COP or subjected to disproportionate use of force within COP, following protests. On December 11, civil society and Indigenous groups co-organized an unsanctioned action outside a plenary room where hundreds of activists demanded climate justice, shouting ‘Step up, pay up’ and banging pots and pans, drawing on the Chilean cacerolazo protest tradition. UN security staff responded with repression, locking arms to form a physical wall and forcibly removing the mostly women, Indigenous people, and youth through a side door where they were kept outside without their coats for a couple of hours. Normally, security staff give protestors a warning before acting. Security officials offered no explanation to people on the inside or outside and eventually barred all civil society members and Indigenous groups from reentering the COP that afternoon.  

Interviewees recounted that Indigenous and Global South women were physically harassed by police during this action, facing harsher treatment than those around them. One Indigenous woman was not allowed back inside to feed her baby. All feared that protesters would be debadged. The following day, after long discussions between the UN and civil society constituencies, everyone was allowed to reenter the COP on condition that they get approval for all future actions. This example demonstrates the overall exclusion of civil society, and the heightened exclusion of Indigenous peoples. The unprecedented show of force against an action uplifting Indigenous priorities solidified the feeling of a colonized COP. This is just one instance of how Indigenous bodies were treated unfairly at COP25. Interviewee Gabriela Baesse told us about a similar experience where Indigenous people, but not others, were denied entry to COP after observing a protest outside the venue.  

The aftermath of the December 11 action illustrated further tensions among youth activists in particular. On December 12, YOUNGO held their daily spokes council meeting. Leaders, all sitting behind desks on a raised dais at the front of the room — a more hierarchical physical configuration than at COP24 and COP19 where YOUNGO members sat in circles — began the meeting with a typical overview of work planned. Soon, attendees began questioning why YOUNGO was not using the meeting to debrief about the action of the previous day, and most of

73. Interview, 12 December 2019  
74. Interview, 12 December 2019  
73. Interview, 12 December 2019
all, why YOUNGO had not issued a statement of solidarity,\textsuperscript{78} as other constituencies had, with the protesters. The discussion broke down into a heated argument between two YOUNGO leaders. The leaders’ reasons for not acting illustrated a fear of jeopardizing the YOUNGO space at COP by endorsing unsanctioned actions.

Most meeting attendees were upset with YOUNGO’s failure to formally support activists, thus illustrating a disconnect between YOUNGO and the young people it was supposed to represent. As Fridays for the Future (FFF) activist Sarah replied when we asked if FFF and YOUNGO collaborated: ‘I don’t think they organize together at all. YOUNGO is more diplomatic... It’s part of the UN, so they’re not really activists. They’re more delegates of the United Nations’.\textsuperscript{79} Even more notable was the underrepresentation of Indigenous and Global South individuals at the meeting and an absence of any sustained discussion about how the action disproportionately affected these people. The FFF members were also underrepresented at YOUNGO meetings for the entire week that we attended COP25. YOUNGO appeared to be a space for engaging long-time COP attendees and Global North youth around policy, rather than a space to welcome all youth (especially newcomers) to imagine and plan diverse tactics for leveraging their power at COP.\textsuperscript{80}

Interviewees also highlighted an increased tokenization of youth, another effect of Thunberg’s fame. Even though youth were invited to speak at more and more events, their involvement was superficial. When youth were invited, there was often little attention to \textit{which} youth, perpetuating an overemphasis on Global North perspectives: ‘The youth space is incredibly insecure. We are facing increased tokenization, increased bypass of constituencies. Everyone wants to talk about young people, but they want to cherry-pick the young people that they want’.\textsuperscript{81}

The practice of excluding those who are most affected by the climate crisis is much more widespread than at the COPs alone. Speaking at the Moana Pavilion sponsored event ‘Voices of the Youth: Claiming, Achieving and Advancing Climate Justice in the Pacific’,\textsuperscript{82} Marshallese poet, artist, and educator, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner recounted a story about her involvement in the September 2019 climate strikes:

\begin{quote}
We were up at the front with the other Indigenous youth and we got subsumed. The Marshallese youth delegates I was with got pushed to the back, while people were chanting, ‘the seas are rising and so are we’. … It’s weird to be coming from an island where you literally see the seas rising and yet you get pushed to the back. It’s very much a metaphor for the ways in which a lot of brown youth activists are still being kind of not given the space that they deserve.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

Jetnil-Kijiner therefore thought there was still work to be done in the area of coalition building, but also highlighted that she was inspired by the youth and by ‘how ambitious and how angry [they are] and just willing to just go there with what they’re demanding’.\textsuperscript{84} The urgency of their actions felt appropriate to Jetnil-Kijiner, who said that activists do not have the luxury of only using their nice voice with politicians anymore.

In the context of climate strikes, one explanation for lack of meaningful engagement of front-line communities is lack of knowledge. While most of our interviewees had thought about colonization before, this concept was new to one interviewee who was a member of FFF. Peter

\begin{footnotes}
\item[78] ibid
\item[79] Interview, 11 December 2019
\item[80] Foran et al. 2017 identified a similar divide between policy-oriented youth and more radical youth at COP 19
\item[81] Interview with Peter Loewi
\item[82] view here: vimeo.com/378233540
\item[83] 10 December 2019
\item[84] Ibid
\end{footnotes}
Loewi highlighted this lack of knowledge as a challenge for the emerging youth movement. While teenage strikers should not be at fault for not having considered the ties between colonialism and climate crisis, this knowledge gap illustrates a broader danger of calling for action without critical attention to what kind of action, or to how action predicated on climate emergency can reinforce oppressive systems. It underlines the need for more seasoned activists and leaders to educate and empower the new, energetic, and passionate children and youth to organize in a justice-oriented and decolonizing way.

Fortunately, Thunberg’s actions in 2019 demonstrate her increasing commitment to leveraging her media attention to centre marginalized voices. In her tour of North America in the lead up to COP25, Thunberg visited the Pine Ridge and Standing Rock reservations where she spoke alongside Indigenous youth leaders resisting oil pipelines. At COP25, she gave over one of her press conferences to Indigenous youth, standing in the background as they danced and sang in their Indigenous languages. These actions parallel increasing mention of climate justice, and Indigenous peoples in particular, in her speeches. If only the UN could start to change as fast as Thunberg has.

6 INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP ON CLIMATE

Interviewees offered insight into how to combat intersectional exclusion and to promote climate justice with respect to the space, policymaking and organizing at COP. Their responses suggest a healing process challenging capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy and operating from the environmental justice framework of meaningful involvement and prefigurative organizing based in relationships and horizontal leadership. Interviewees understood some of these changes as steps towards decolonization. Big Wind, for example, worked to return land to their people and to live more in relation to the land, but also described decolonization as re-indigenizing, pointing to the need to use Indigenous languages, rather than English. They described decolonization as a lifelong practice that means different things for different people.

We recognize the problems with using decolonization as a metaphor, since doing so glosses over the ultimate goal of returning land to dispossessed Indigenous people. Therefore, our analysis focuses on how to enhance meaningful involvement and leadership of Indigenous peoples and those with intersecting marginalized identities in the COP25 space, policymaking, and organizing. We argue that centreing Indigenous involvement and leadership in the youth climate justice movement is critical for rapid and just climate action and for moving toward decolonization.

6.1 Policy creation and implementation

Many of our Global South interviewees championed an environmental justice approach emphasizing meaningful involvement of and leadership by those most affected by environmental harm. At the community level, Jean-bétrand Mhandu explained that a just approach to talking about climate change might necessitate using more accessible terminology. For example, terms like ‘renewable energy’ or ‘carbon emissions’ might not hold much meaning for a rural community in Zimbabwe. Jean-bétrand suggested asking communities about issues they have noticed, such as the effect of

81. See Tuck and Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’
87. Interview, 11 December 2019
drought on their cows, and then asking for their proposals for how to address the issue,\textsuperscript{88} an outlook radically opposed to the imposition of solutions on communities by distant powers that characterizes most neocolonial development projects, so many of which have failed even on their own terms. Jean-betrand described how communities in Zimbabwe already know how to live sustainably upon the land: ‘keep your wetlands safe, you don’t chop down trees in a place that is not your yard’.\textsuperscript{89} Relocating power and valuing expertise within communities begins the process of increasing inclusivity in policy creation and implementation while promoting bottom-up solutions. It is an approach critical for realizing climate justice.

Within the UNFCCC, the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Platform (IPLCP), which is in the process of operationalizing, is a formal effort toward inclusivity created through the work of Indigenous peoples and people from the Global South. Its purpose is to share best practices around climate mitigation and adaptation among local communities and Indigenous peoples and to enhance their engagement in the UNFCCC process. The IPLCP is limited,\textsuperscript{90} however, because it fails to recognize institutional barriers to Indigenous peoples and colonization in the UNFCCC process. In addition to this type of platform, Indigenous nations, since they are self-determining, must also be recognized in the same way that states are, as formal parties to the UNFCCC. Nonetheless, the UN’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, created in 2002,\textsuperscript{91} has been reasonably successful in giving voice to representatives of Indigenous peoples in the UN system, and it suggests a model that the new IPLCP may need to consider if it is to succeed.

In Madrid, Indigenous peoples were at the forefront of demanding meaningful involvement. On December 10, a group of Indigenous leaders united as Minga Indígena\textsuperscript{92} confronted the COP presidency with a charter demanding meaningful involvement of Indigenous communities in climate negotiations.\textsuperscript{93} Their presence in the space, despite their lack of badges and their decreased numbers as a result of the location change of COP, was a strategic tactic because it made Indigenous peoples visible and inspired Indigenous youth such as Big Wind.

Finally, interviewees recognized and lobbied for the need to abandon dubious, market-based ‘solutions’ to climate change (see Figure 3):

You’re sitting here talking about carbon markets, talking about all these false solutions. You know what the solution is? We cannot continue with capitalism. Capitalism is the problem. We need to find a different economic system ... we don’t need to just transform our energy system. We need to transform the way that we think about this earth and how we think that we can just buy off and sell off pieces because essentially people own certain places. That’s not how it is.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{88} ibid
\textsuperscript{89} ibid
\textsuperscript{90} Zoha Shawoo and Thomas F. Thornton, ‘The UN local communities and Indigenous peoples’ platform: A traditional ecological knowledge-based evaluation’ (2019) 10 Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change e575
\textsuperscript{91} See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples>.
\textsuperscript{92} A word with Quechua origins, minga references collective work for the common good often on collectively owned lands.
\textsuperscript{94} Interview with Big Wind
Big Wind went on to elaborate on the concept of the Wiindigo — a cannibal, a disease. When you catch it, ‘nothing will ever, ever be enough. And so you just keep eating and eating to the point where you eat yourself ... you eat your own flesh’. Anishinaabe activist Winona LaDuke derides our present economic system as ‘Wiindigo economics’, advocating instead for an Indigenous economics, something much more in line with how our interviewees envisioned the future. Harkening back to Shiva’s definition of climate justice, this approach requires that ‘every person, every community, every society have the freedom to create and defend economies that cause no harm to the climate or to other people’.

6.2 Organizing

Hierarchical organizing reproduces colonial dynamics by excluding Indigenous perspectives. Horizontal, relational, and participatory organizing models are better suited to promoting involvement of Indigenous and other marginalized communities and should be utilized at COP. In the context of YOUNGO, meetings can shift from leaders sitting on a dais or behind a podium, to gathering in circles and encouraging broad-based participation. Thanks to Pacific Islanders and others from the Global South, COPs now host Talanoa Dialogues — inclusive, participatory and transparent storytelling — aspiring to dismantle hierarchy and break climate deadlock. While it is too soon to tell, and the success of Talanoa Dialogues is debated, Talanoa Dialogues represent the type

---

95. Interview, 12 December 2019  
97. Shiva, 'Soil Not Oil'  
98. We recognize that these forms of organizing risk oversimplification of Indigenous governance models and can be coopted by dominant groups.
of challenge to colonial and neoliberal power structures that could facilitate change in international climate governance.99

Organizers of events and plenaries at COP should ensure that Indigenous voices are given the most time and emphasis. Journalists and activists should uplift Indigenous stories rather than only those of European activists. In sum, privileged climate justice activists who want to be good relatives and organizers should ‘shut up and listen’,100 recognizing that they have historically monopolized a lot of space.

Making space requires personal sacrifice and recognizing privilege, particularly with regard to workload. Just because someone does double the work does not mean their viewpoint is doubly valuable:101 some, like Peter, a white man from the United States with great financial privilege, have more access and resources to do the work than others less fortunate. For making space in conversations, Gabriela Baesse suggested allotting time for each person to talk.102 Her organization, Engajamundo, was also working to increase the representation of Indigenous people in their COP delegation and to build coalitions with Indigenous communities within Brazil by bringing meetings to communities, rather than asking Indigenous folks to participate via online meetings which required many to travel for internet access. These horizontal organizing and discussion techniques are important tools for centering voices that are typically excluded and represent not just discussion techniques but a commitment to participatory values and inclusion.

Finally, a just organizing practice would seriously consider how individual actions impact the more-than-human world and strive to minimize negative impacts. Unlike many negotiators, and certainly unlike all the countries that profess to care about climate breakdown but fail to act, many of our interviewees and their fellow youth activists tried to walk the walk of their activism. Some chose low-carbon methods of travel to COP25. Others worked to offset their air travel, ate a vegan diet, encouraged the COP to offer more vegan food and did most of their organizing virtually (e.g. through Zoom video conferencing). Shantanu, part of the Brahma Kumaris in India, expressed his organization’s motto as ‘self-transformation to world transformation’, arguing that each person needs to ensure that their actions align with their values.103 This has been a distinct feature of Indigenous-led pipeline struggles in North America, specifically the camps created by the Water Protectors at Standing Rock.104 Aligning climate actions with Indigenous modes of governance, relations and protocols contributes to the decolonization of organizing and policy-making.

6.3 Space

Rather than the impersonal coldness, negativity and disagreement of COP25, a COP space encouraging meaningful involvement would generate feelings of solidarity among participants. On 13 December 2019, youth did just that, commandeering the stage at a high-level event where they began singing, the audience joining in solidarity. Afterwards, youth gathered outside the room, hugging and crying, many with flushed checks bright beneath green stripes under their eyes (the mark of FFF). This sense of community after the action was a stark contrast to the shrill voice of the moderator who repeated ‘you have one minute, or we will debadge you!’ before youth left the stage.

100. Interview with Big Wind
101. Interview with Peter Loewi
102. Interview, 12 December 2019
103. Interview, 11 December 2019
104. See Grosse, ‘Climate Justice Movement Building: Values and Cultures of Creation in Santa Barbara, California’
Fig. 4 Youth unite on stage.

Big Wind felt that songs and prayers were critical to healing the COP space: ‘I don’t care if someone tells me [not to,] I’m going to burn some medicine in here because this place needs it. I’m going to share a song in here ’cause this place needs it’. Asking other attendees how they were doing was a way that Jolien worked to build community and to energize herself and her fellows to sustain their engagement in COP. Shantanu organized a dialogue space where people could express their frustrations with the COP and brainstorm ways to improve it, providing some relief to participants by connecting them with others who shared their feelings.

The walkout on the last day of COP25 continued these methods by centreing the voices of frontline communities, generating solidarity and relationships, and healing the space through song. Frustrated by the failure of COP25, hundreds of youths, joined by some adults, sat in a big group on the floor. Speakers and musicians, many Indigenous, from the Global South and mostly women, spoke of climate justice and determination to continue the struggle. As the MC Niria Alicia put it:

> as we know, the climate crisis doesn’t just look like a 1.5 degree Celsius increase, it looks like missing and murdered Indigenous women in our communities, it looks like migrants, it looks like the border crisis ... it looks like food insecurity... it looks like violence on our women and so we have to

105. Interview, 12 December 2019
106. Interview, 12 December 2019
remember that. Our struggles are all interconnected, and we need to work together to create real solutions for our people.\textsuperscript{107}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{Niria Alicia smiles at the crowd gathered for the walkout.}
\end{figure}

Indigenous women were heard in this space, contrasting their treatment throughout the COP as tokens or mere photo opportunities. An Indigenous woman from New Zealand continued the momentum from Alicia’s speech, calling out the colonialism in the negotiation halls: ‘these same nations are the ones who are refusing to uphold our Indigenous and human rights … who are negotiating right now so that they can protect their right to colonize, so that they can protect their right to pollute’.\textsuperscript{108} She ended by uniting the crowd in a chant in her language. Chanting and singing continued as participants joined together to walk out of the colonized COP, rejecting its exclusive politics. It was a liberating and joyful way to end the negotiations and to exit the space, an act of resistance and creation\textsuperscript{109} led by Indigenous peoples.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{107} Walkout, 13 December 2019
\textsuperscript{108} ibid
\end{flushleft}
7 CONCLUSION

The COP25 was surely one of the worst UN climate conferences. The lack of progress in terms of both the stated goals of the conference to finalize rules under the Paris Agreement’s Article 6 ‘rulebook’ and, more so, the failure to develop credible policies and actions under the auspices of that Agreement for climate justice, was particularly appalling given the IPCC’s 2018 warning that we must reduce emissions by 45 per cent by 2030, a target that the world is not on track to meet.\textsuperscript{110} The exclusive nature of the COP contributed to this failure. Its exclusive space pushed Indigenous peoples to the margins; exclusive policies attempted to use the same flawed logic which created the climate crisis to solve it; and exclusive organizing diverted focus from frontline communities. The bodies and voices of Indigenous peoples, people from the Global South, youth, the queer community, and women were disregarded, and, in some cases, mistreated and denied entry — injustices that interlock to form particular experiences of oppression for those with multiple intersecting marginalized identities. This intersectional exclusion\textsuperscript{111} is integral to colonialism.

Intersectional exclusion is unjust and fundamentally stunts our collective capacity to respond to climate crisis. Those facing intersectional exclusion are also some of the most affected by climate crisis and, due to their experience, most knowledgeable about real climate solutions. By excluding Indigenous and other marginalized communities from the process of negotiation, policy creation, and in even activism, COP is ineffective, ignoring voices that could holistically address the problem.

\textsuperscript{110}. IPCC, 'Summary for Policymakers'
\textsuperscript{111}. Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'
The COP process must abandon market solutions and recognize the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. Songs, building relationships, and demonstrating care for each other are just a few ways through which those who want a livable future can work together to heal policy and activist spaces and to engender the kind of community-building necessary for system change and for living within climate crisis. At COP and within the youth climate justice movement, moving toward decolonization and realizing climate justice require meaningful involvement of and leadership by Indigenous peoples, youth, the queer community, people from the Global South, and women.