Unsettling the Commons
Social Movements Within, Against, and Beyond Settler Colonialism

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Commoning in a Time of Dispossession

Sweat speckled with glitter drips off the side of my face splashing against the woodgrain floor of Decadent Squalor, a DIY venue in Montréal. It’s an unseasonably hot evening for mid-May and we are crammed tightly into the venue to listen to a trio of radical punk bands: Fail Better, Force Quit and Frankie Fricative & the Facials. The crowd, mirroring the bands, is a mix of white anarchist punks and queer/gender fucking femmes, the latter of whom have come from the “Glamour Kiss Look Fair,” the naughty sibling of Montréal’s yearly anarchist book fair.

As the show ends and we stumble into the cool breeze of night, we are immediately swept up in one of the dozens of nighttime marches taking place in conjunction with the Québec student strike. In our shimmering tight clothes and slightly running makeup we snake through the city streets with a motley crew of radicalized students, veteran anarchist organizers, older Québécois leftists, and those masked up in black bloc formation. These folks have taken to the street in record numbers for consecutive nights in defiance of Loi 78, the anti-demonstration ordinance passed in an “emergency” measure by Québec’s provincial government. We are evading police by snaking from street to street without any set route. I witness a dumpster being turned over and lit on fire to block the police from disrupting our march. Spirits are high and without much verbal communication we are cooperating and collaborating with each other. In a moment of reflection I think about how that evening’s two very different events (the punk show and the night march) were both building towards something similar: the reclamation of space and the formation of the commons.
The punk show in the DIY venue and the [temporary] reclamation of the city streets that night in Montréal could both be understood as different but related expressions of co-creating space through the practice of commoning. This long-term building of community is rife with conflict, contradictions, and disagreements, yet it entails as historian Peter Linebaugh (2014) attests, “complex kin patterns, forms of mutuality, and customs held in common” (82). A reformulation and reinterpretation of long-standing practices of commoning underlies a vast number of leftists projects in response to the forces of dispossession and proletarianization that are central to capitalism.

On that balmy evening in Montréal, where the cracks of new ways of being were shining through the shell of the old worlds, this claiming of the commons was reinforced by the repetition of the classic call and response chant: “Whose streets? Our streets!” We alternate the call and response between French and English. It feels good to chant in unison and I join the chorus, but I am struck with a pang of worry that something was missing. A lyric from a song that Fail Better played earlier that evening starts to repeat in my head, “we all try to do what we can, while living on stolen land.” In that moment I am reminded of the inherent contradiction of claiming space without acknowledging the context of settlement and occupation in which we live.

A few years later, in an interview I conducted with Fred Burrill, an organizer during the Québec student strike, I learned that the relationship of the student movement to land-based struggles was hotly debated during that time. Fred explained how in the
moments when the “Whose streets” chants proliferated within marches and actions, groups of anti-authoritarian organizers worked to push back against this discourse by countering with chants that sought to resist the erasure of Indigenous sovereignty. He recounts:

It was a big issue in the strike actually, at some points we were doing those nightly demonstrations and doing them everyday and it became a kind of contest between people being "A qui le Québec? A nous le Québec!" and us being like "A qui le Québec? Au Mohawk le Québec ou a les Algonquins le Québec!" - and really trying to push on those issues of decolonization and land.

This vignette helps to draw out a key problem with how the commons is understood among many social movements within the radical left in North America. The prevailing discourse around the commons becomes one that seeks to claim ownership over particular places and territories without acknowledging the settler colonial context in which our struggles take place. As I have written elsewhere, rally chants bring into the public realm political debates that are happening within movements (Fortier 2015). They also signal shifting relationships and politics and, as Fred Burrill suggests, the debates he took part in on the streets of Montréal contributed to the [modestly successful] efforts to link the Québec student strike with Indigenous struggles against the proposed Plan Nord, a large-scale development project.

So, what is the commons? How do we practice commoning? What does it mean to build social movements to [re]claim the commons on stolen land? And what does a politics and practice of decolonization look like for non-Indigenous peoples seeking to resist the state while also supporting struggles for Indigenous self-determination? These questions are central to this book. Drawing on interviews conducted with fifty-one
activists in nearly a dozen cities in Canada and the United States, this book explores the shifts in politics, practices, and cultures of social movements as they develop social and political relationships with Indigenous peoples struggling for sovereignty and self-determination. The activists I interviewed organize in many different radical left struggles in the Canadian and U.S. settler states, but can be described as sharing certain principles and practices in common - what Chris Dixon (2014) refers to as the anti-authoritarian current. This current is made up of anarchist groups, women of colour feminists, radical queer/trans* organizers, environmental justice groups, Black liberation movements, disability justice activists, anti-colonial struggles, and other anti-capitalist and anti-oppressive organizations that converge, overlap, contradict and challenge each other.

These movements emerge at an important historical conjuncture. Over the last twenty five years, at least since the 1994 Zapatista uprising against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), we have seen significant interactions between anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-state struggles throughout the world (McNally 2006). These interactions have led to a greater focus on pluralism and decentralization as liberatory strategies. Strategies that incorporate a widely shared desire for more direct forms of democracy and a critique of the many structures of authoritarianism emanating from state, capitalist, and bureaucratic leftist institutions (Conway & Singh 2011). Movements in the West seeking to re-imagine or reclaim other forms of democracy while resisting austerity and neoliberalism (the Indignados in Spain, the student movements in Québec and the UK, and the Occupy movements in the U.S., etc.) have often remained
constrained in their political visions by the limits of Western modernity. Duncan Ivison (2010) argues that the problem with these alternative “deliberative” approaches to democracy is that they face a crisis of legitimacy when applied to colonial contexts and as Coulthard (2014) reinforces, this is especially so in settler colonial contexts.

The central argument of this book, that a politics of unsettling and decolonizing are not only different from other forms of liberatory struggles in settler colonial states but are foundational to their success, began to crystallize for me during my experience as a member and organizer with the migrant justice collective No One Is Illegal-Toronto. Also while writing this book, I witnessed the rise of the Idle No More movement and the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s *Call to Action*. While these events brought many of the lessons being learned among a small segment of the radical left to mainstream settler society there are significant road blocks ahead. That’s why it’s important to examine the contradictions that we will come up against when, for instance, we seek to (re)claim the commons within a settler colonial context.

The book is structured as a series of short vignettes and fragments of activist discussions placed into conversation with Indigenous theory and social movement scholarship. It is not meant to be a definitive discussion on the commons as it relates to settler colonialism but rather a contribution to an important dialogue taking place across a wide range of social movements organizing in settler states like Canada and the United States. We start with a look back at Occupy Wall Street as an example of movements to [re]claim the commons and then draw in experiences from organizers engaged in migrant justice, no borders, Black liberation, queer/trans* liberation and a number of other
movements seeking to create space and new forms of being within, against, and beyond our current social and political context. I draw from Indigenous activists and theorists to argue that if these movements are not attuned to and respecting Indigenous place-based sovereignties, they fail to effectively articulate a liberatory practice outside of settler colonial logics. The book ends by exploring whether it is possible for movements to “unsettle” the commons through what radical Black theorist Fred Moten (2017) calls small scale actions with infinite proliferations.

**Occupy All Streets – the Settler Colonial Context of the Occupy Movement**

On September 17, 2011, the first substantial general assembly of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) took place at Bowling Green Park. The “Occupiers” as they came to be known stood between the charging bull statue, one of the most iconic symbols of the capitalist elite, and the National Museum of the American Indian, itself an important though perhaps unintentionally ironic symbol for a movement based on the strategy of reclamation through occupation. It was on the steps of the National Museum of the American Indian where the decision was made to march to the financial district, occupy Zuccotti Park, and rename it Liberty Plaza (Holmes 2012). Occupy Wall Street can be understood in a global context as part of a wave of opposition to neoliberal austerity following the 2008 financial crisis. The occupation of Zuccotti Park joined a growing list of (temporarily) reclaimed public spaces including Taksim Square (Istanbul), Tahrir Square (Cairo), Puerta del Sol (Madrid), Syntagma Square (Athens), the Wisconsin Capitol Building (Madison), Oscar Grant Plaza (Oakland) and more recently Causeway Bay and Mong Kok in Hong Kong (Kilibarda 2012; Khatib et al. 2012). These public
spaces have been central to anti-austerity resistance efforts and they have also been incubators for experimentation in developing alternative forms of social relations outside of the logics of capitalism. These encampments have been described as engaging in the practice of reclaiming or re-negotiating the commons. For instance, the political theorist George Caffentzis (2012) argues, “the truly subversive intent of the Occupy site is to transform public space into a commons” (396). The commons in this respect differs from public space in that it exists outside of state control and is opened by those who live on it and share it according to their own rules.

The fight for the commons has been a thread that has connected the history of class struggle into our time (Thompson 1993; Linebaugh 2014). Inspired greatly by the Zapatista takeover of the zócalo in San Cristóbal de las Casas in 1994, the concept of the commons has been regaining popularity among the radical left (Federici 2010). In the context of decolonizing social movements, Sharma and Wright (2009), for instance, propose that projects of decolonization must “challenge capitalist social relations and those organized through the national state, such as sovereignty ... their goal must be the gaining of a global commons” (131). However, if we consider settler colonialism from the perspective put forward by the late Patrick Wolfe (2006), where it is understood not as a past event but an ongoing structure, then it becomes important to think about the multiple ways in which the desire to reclaim the commons, even a “global commons,” can be embedded within the logics of Indigenous dispossession and elimination.

Many contemporary political projects have been informed by an ethos of reclaiming the commons including environmentalist back-to-the-land movements,
festivals like Burning Man, community gardens, kibbutzes, and alternative currency movements. Others forms of commoning include sanctuary city movements that seek to resist the enforcement of racist border policies, queer/trans* radical art and dance spaces that seek to renegotiate desire, belonging, and care in urban centres, and most visibly the Occupy Wall Street movement that emerged and spread throughout the United States and beyond. These are moves towards claiming the commons because they seek to renegotiate social relations in a radically democratic and egalitarian way in a particular space. Like all social movements, those struggling for the commons are also full of contradictions. Despite striving for liberation and taking bold actions we bring in all sorts of beliefs and power relations into movements, including those tied to the governing forces of oppression in our society. The tensions that Occupy struggled with as an exciting and innovative movement are present within and among many other radical struggles. So, it’s no surprise that even early in the life of Occupy Wall Street the contradiction of reclaiming the commons within a settler colonial context became one of the most persistent and inescapable internal debates facing the burgeoning movement (Kilibarda 2012).

For instance, John Paul Montano, a Nishnaabeg writer and language instructor, in a widely circulated open letter written just days after the movement began, articulates an important intervention that lingered throughout the encampments:

I had hoped that you would acknowledge that, since you are settlers on indigenous land, you need and want our indigenous consent to your building anything on our land - never mind an entire society. See where I'm going with this? I hope you're still smiling. We're still friends, so don't sweat it. I believe your hearts are in the right place. I know that this whole genocide and colonization thing causes all of us lots of
confusion sometimes. It just seems to me that you're unknowingly doing the same thing to us that all the colonizers before you have done: you want to do stuff on our land without asking our permission (Montano 2011).

Jessica Yee Danforth (2011) (Kanienkehaka/Mohawk) and Joanne Barker (2011) (Lenape) among other Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists (see also Occupy Winnipeg 2011; Walia 2014) followed with similar open letters that sparked long and intense discussions and debates in Occupy general assemblies across the United States and Canada about the tactic of occupation within a settler colonial context.

Notably, these discussions resulted in a split in the Occupy movement in Oakland following a long and bitter argument over the merits of changing the name of the encampment to “Decolonize Oakland” (Khatib et al. 2012; Barker 2012; Grande 2013). Kilibarda (2012) argues that while Occupy’s strength was to clearly and forcefully challenge capitalist relations, “its critique remains circumscribed by eliding the racialised nature of inequality in North America, which has been built on settler-colonial dispossession, genocide, slavery, imperial adventurism, indentured and precarious labour, as well as patriarchal, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant nationalisms” (24). In other words, the Occupy movements struggled to imagine liberation in a way that addresses really important questions about our relationships to Indigenous peoples, these territories, and a reckoning of the histories that structure the context in which we struggle today.

In this book I situate Occupy Wall Street and other contemporary social movement projects in the long history of settlers claiming the commons as resistance to the state and capitalist social relations. I argue that these claims to the commons have also perpetuated settler invasion and Indigenous dispossession. Beginning with a history of
the occupation of Manhattan, the site of Occupy Wall Street, I show how movements to (re)claim the commons on Turtle Island are often structured by the logics of elimination, evasion, naturalization, and appropriation that are foundational to settler colonialism. Despite these contradictions, there remains significant affinity between some of the core values and principles emerging out of movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Indigenous sovereignty struggles. We need to explore these affinities and incommensurabilities if unsettling and decolonizing are to be foundational to liberatory social movements in settler states like Canada and the United States.

The Commons as Practice

A useful place to start imagining the process of unsettling and decolonizing the commons is by recognizing that the commons is not simply a piece of property or a resource, but a practice (Linebaugh 2014; Federici 2010). Through the practice of commoning we nurture relationships of mutuality with fellow commoners and develop the frameworks for new ways of organizing society (Sharma and Wright 2009). However, the practice of commoning is not inherently liberatory within a settler colonial context. As Jaggi Singh, a member of No One Is Illegal-Montréal explains, “settlement is as much an ideology as a practice, and the only way to escape complicity with settlement is active opposition to it” (Walia 2013:129). What makes decolonization so important to the practice of commoning is that it requires those seeking to forge relationships of mutuality to do so while simultaneously opposing the practices of settlement. In my discussions with Essex Lordes and Li Morales, organizers within queer
people of colour struggles in the Bay Area, they explained that decolonization is a practice that is attuned to Indigenous struggles, Black liberation, borders, and radical queer futures in a way that is both caring and destabilizing. Rather than striving for a homogenizing practice of commoning, they suggest that we need to be willing to work through conflict rather than avoid it. These situations are what Tuck and Yang (2012) describe as “dangerous understandings of uncommonality that un-coalesces coalition politics – moves that may feel unfriendly” (35). It is through creating communities and movements that we are better able to acknowledge this “uncommonality.” By acknowledging our complicity in the process of settlement we can then commit to supporting struggles for Indigenous decolonization while we attempt to forge new political spaces beyond the settler state. As Gardner and Giibwanisi (2014) suggest, the practice of decolonizing must bring to the fore the contingency of settler futurity – which makes it a potentially alienating concept for many non-Indigenous people struggling to relinquish their affective affiliations with settler colonial relations. This can happen if we refuse to link our claims to the commons to the practice of settling.

Uruguayan political theorist Raúl Zibechi (2005) argues that we are moving toward a new relationship between people and territories. Specifically, the concept of territory has had a much more central role in political struggles as Indigenous struggles and landless peasants movements have developed closer relationships with other struggles of people on the margins of society. Zibechi (2005) explains, “The new relationships between territory and subject emerge from the prior deterritorialization, which represents a wound in the urban fabric. The flight of capital, with regard to the
working class, is a flight from the spaces in which territorially grounded working-class power limited its options” (16). This flight of capital also leaves devastation in its wake when it seeks temporary geographic expansion and displacement in order to solve the crisis of over-accumulation (Harvey 2004). However, capital flight alone does not cause displacement and devastation. As Coulthard (2014) clearly reminds us, in settler colonial states the ongoing and active process of dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their territories remains foundational to capital accumulation, particularly through resource extraction. The trail of urban decay and rusted-out abandoned factories that pushes Black communities and other working class people into the margins in cities like Detroit, Baltimore, Hamilton, and Buffalo are directly linked to the processes that make Fort Chipewyan, Aamijiwnaang, and Sogorea Te sites of environmental destruction and ongoing Indigenous dispossession.

So what does decolonizing the commons as a practice mean in practice? There are a number of good examples of work that is attuned to this context, particularly projects emerging out of anti-racist and radical Black struggles that have coalesced around an abolitionist politics that moves beyond the Prison Industrial Complex and seeks to fundamentally transform the way that we deal with violence and social problems (see Crass 2014; Kelley 2002; Subdury 2004). Similarly, the notions of horizontalism and autonomous zones that have guided collective decision making and governance structures from as disparate a set of movements as the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Aymara struggles in Bolivia to the Occupy encampments across Canada and the United States have provided numerous people with tangible visions of the practices needed to build the
types of societies we wish to create (see Khatib 2012; Zibechi 2010; Sitrin 2012). These movements are no longer simply reacting to capitalist, colonialist, heteropatriarchal, or white supremacist power structures, but are also seeking to develop new practices that contribute to our collective counter-power.

Cleve Higgins, a white anti-colonial activist in Montréal, suggests that we cannot expect the majority of settler society to engage in anti-colonial movements and argues that instead we should strive to expand and develop our power-base among those people willing to learn with humility and accountability. He explains, “I don't think that the centres of power in this context: government, state, and corporate power and settler power are going to be convinced or change their mind or be swayed or gradually come on-side or those kind of things.” Instead, Cleve suggests that we put our focus within movements that leave open the possibilities for the interconnection between prison abolition, anti-imperialism, gender liberation, disability justice, migrant justice, and a number of other struggles who acknowledge the centrality of Indigenous decolonization. This intersectional analysis needs to lead to actions that tie all those seeking to resist the dominant power structures in our society to the fates of other communities.

Luam Kidane, a queer Black organizer based in Montréal emphasized that one of the ways we can achieve this work is by abandoning the practice of allyship in favour of a practice that positions ourselves as co-conspirators in struggles for decolonization. This is a much more dangerous position for those who benefit from and are complicit in the structures of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. Luam suggests:

I like the term co-conspirator better because it demands immediate action and that action is understood in relationship to what it is that you
are fighting together [...] [I]t’s in these conversations and dialogues of figuring out strategies and tactics that I think decolonization really sits. So, looking at ways to transform systems of capitalism and looking at ways to reaffirm Indigenous sovereignty and looking at ways to really unearth anti-blackness in our movement organizing. All of those things, I think for me, make sense when we think of it as co-conspirators.

Becoming co-conspirators means that organizers from a multitude of different movements see their struggles and lives as being intricately linked with those of others through the process of engaging in concrete actions predicated on an understanding of our positionality within the structures of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, border imperialism, and settler colonialism.

For Kidane and Abbas (2014) this requires attempting to dismantle and challenge dominant systems, especially if you benefit from them, by every means necessary. What Kidane and Abbas mean by “every means necessary” is that we must take a holistic and broad approach to both our movements of resistance and our acts of pre-figuration. In our material struggles for decolonization we must attend to the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and relational. As we sat on the couch in his west-Toronto apartment, Hussan, a long-time organizer with No One Is Illegal-Toronto, reflected on what this might mean. He calmly leaned back and asked, “What do we, as people who are despondent about the kind of world we live in, but aren’t completely able to step out of it?” Grappling with his own question, he offered the following:

We can’t just step out of capitalism and colonization and civilization – so we create these spaces within. They might be political spaces, they might be communal spaces, they might be spaces for art or whatever, and in those spaces we practice. And we often fail, but we keep trying. And the hope is that these many different ways of being, these different practices that are emerging, and all these different sub-sub sections of people will eventually, as they do, speak to each other. And perhaps
expand that and include more people to create the many kinds of worlds we want to live in.

In this respect Hussan pointed to the increased emphasis on relationship building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities - including an emphasis on building relationships with the land. Recent demonstrations across Canada and the United States in opposition to tar sands pipelines are important examples of this work. Activists within the anti-authoritarian current have sought to forge relationships with Indigenous land-based struggles using a diverse range of tactics and strategies to oppose the tar sands and their pipelines. This has included lobbying, community research and education, rallies and protests, fundraising, legal interventions, direct actions and blockades, traffic disruptions, and a number of other strategies (Black et al. 2014).

In Fort Chippewayan, many non-Indigenous activists have accepted the invitation to participate in the annual Tar Sands Healing Walk organized by members of the Athabasca Cree community. Jesse Cardinal (2014), the coordinator of Keepers of the Athabasca and a co-organizer of the Healing Walk, explains the importance of the practice of spirituality in building relationships of resistance to the tar sands, noting:

We try to ensure that our guests understand why and how we are praying, how they can participate, and any protocols that should be followed, so that when we start the walk, we can start in a good way - meaning to have good intentions and a better understanding of what prayer is and how prayer can help to heal the land, the people, the water, the air, and all living beings. We want to begin the walk in a unified way and with the knowledge of our elders and ceremonial people (132).

Through the development of these co-conspiratorial practices, non-Indigenous people may be open to developing connections with the land through the place-based
relationships of solidarity formed with Indigenous peoples asserting their sovereignties and responsibilities to the territories on which we collectively struggle.

*The Commons as Place*

A lot of folks within Occupy pointed to the supposed hypocrisy of critiques that challenged the practice of “occupation” when such a tactic has become one of the most visible components of Indigenous peoples strategies to protect the land and water. Settler scholar Adam J. Barker (2012) pushes back against these reactions, explaining that for Indigenous peoples land is not being occupied but reclaimed. Barker (2012) notes, “At issue is not just ownership or control, but rather ways of being on and with the land. The goal is not to reform imposed systems such that Indigenous peoples can equally benefit from them, but rather to fundamentally decolonize power and place through a transformation of how people relate to and in place” (331). This is a critical distinction if we are to re-imagine the commons through a decolonizing lens. The transformation of how people relate to and in place has been a core question for activists within migrant justice and anti-gentrification struggles in urban centres. In particular, organizers in these movements must identify and negotiate the contradictions inherent in their struggle to claim access to space and the right to the city with the land and sovereignty claims of urban Indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2014).

Li Morales, a queer organizer within migrant justice and anti-gentrification struggles in the Bay Area, discussed how movements cannot avoid the links between capitalism and racism that displaces people from their home and colonialism that dispossess people of their territories. Li argues:

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It’s really hard to talk about gentrification without *a priori* understanding empire, colonialism, and illegal occupation. Like, you got the same history that I did, right? Everything was taken through theft and broken treaties. People are still here and what does [decolonizing movements] look like? Sometimes it feels all encompassing. It’s hard for a lot of people to think that through.

Making those links clear is not only an important political strategy for activist groups, but opens up the potential to re-imagine our political campaigns more broadly. This is especially important when neoliberalism has created a context of precarity in our jobs, housing, and relationships. Drawing from the work of Toronto-based novelist Dionne Brand, Estraven Lupino-Smith, an anarchist settler activist cautioned about the difficulties inherent in trying to decolonize our relationship to place given the precariousness in which most people live in the cities in which we organize. They explain, “All of these people are so tired of the land shifting beneath their feet that they can’t think about the fact that they are also in a place that is contested and in a place that’s not theirs. I feel like that’s how I think about it actually.” Developing spaces where these contradictions can be discussed and addressed in tangible ways is a big part of the unsettling/decolonizing work of groups like No One Is Illegal.

Harjap Grewal, an organizer with No One Is Illegal-Vancouver Coast Salish Territories, explains that such an endeavour should transform not only our relationships with Indigenous peoples but also with the territories on which we live. He notes, “Our struggles for migrant justice cannot be limited to gaining access to nation-states or property. Migrants’ relationships to the land needs to be rooted in stewardship of the land rather than colonial and capitalist ideas of landownership” (Walia 2013:240). Groups like No One Is Illegal have become conscious of the need to not only challenge the border as
a racist mechanism meant to sustain a system of exploiting migrant labour, but also as practice of dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their relationships to land. By engaging in these practices, activists are seeking to move away from what Glen Coulthard describes as anchoring struggles “against the neoliberal city’s further enclosures to a decontextualized and ahistorical notion of “the commons” that threatens to inadvertently treat settler colonial cities as *urbs nullius*: urban space void of Indigenous sovereign presence” (Coulthard 2014:12). Acknowledging the foundational nature of settler colonialism in structuring all struggles for space within settler states like Canada and the United States, radical migrant justice organizers, like those in No One Is Illegal, are tasked with not only seeking to create movements that assert the freedom to “move, stay, and return,” they must also be open to working towards developing new non-exploitative relationships with the land and with those Indigenous communities who have stewarded those relationships in place.

Migrant justice activists, even those who seek to challenge the legitimacy of colonial nation-state authority, must always contend with the day-to-day functions of the state apparatus in maintaining and enforcing border policies. Resistance to contemporary border policy occurs both against and within the nation-state (Fortier 2013). Resistance to federal immigration enforcement inevitably leads to the mobilization of migrant communities against deportations and/or exclusion from basic rights and services denied to them within the nation-state. While anti-deportation campaigns and campaigns to secure essential services for migrants are often important moments of building movement strength for migrant justice activists they also pose a dilemma in terms of practicing a
decolonial politics.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous movements are continually engaged in strategic debates (both internally within groups and externally across groups, communities, and nations) around whether it is more important to emphasize campaigns that seek recognition and incorporation into the settler state (i.e. pathways to immigration status or forms of limited Indigenous self-government as domestic dependent nations) and political actions that reject the state altogether. It is easy to fall into a line of political struggle that reinforces the logics and structures of colonialism in order to resist an acute form of oppression, particularly in times of dire emergency. Toronto-based migrant justice organizer Hussan explains these tensions, noting:

How do we go about doing anti-colonial work and simultaneously stopping an individual’s deportation? Sometimes the only way to stop a deportation is by getting enough people to sign a petition that might actually pressure the government to change its mind - and that requires pitching the person as, in some ways, a good citizen, a valuable contributing member of society. Which is fine. I mean people can be valuable contributing members of society, but what we are actually saying is, “we want this person to have membership in the state.” This might be the only way to keep this family together, but our actions might go against the notion that we should be organizing against colonization. So that’s a conflict and contradiction that comes up all the time.

No One Is Illegal collectives across Canada negotiate this contradiction regularly through their campaign Status for All. Status for All is a broad campaign with twelve overarching principles agreed upon by each of the No One Illegal collectives, but practiced differently based on each group’s local context. The central goal of the campaign is to demand the Canadian government implement “a comprehensive, transparent, inclusive and ongoing regularization program that is both equitable and accessible to all persons living without
legal immigration status in Canada” (No One Is Illegal-Vancouver 2004). Activist-scholar Peter Nyers (2010) explains that while the demand for regularization of status is focused on recognition by the state, there is a more disruptive undercurrent at play within this political campaign. For Nyers, the subversive potential of No One Is Illegal’s campaign for Status for All lies in its ability to create political spaces where undocumented people can be seen and make their presence known. This increased visibility is an assertion of one’s right to be recognized as equal with other members of the settler polity but on the surface it does not appear to disrupt the settler state’s sovereignty. In fact, it could be argued, as Lawrence & Dua (2005) do, that such a campaign may help to legitimize the state’s claims to sovereignty over Indigenous territories.

South Asian activist and author Harsha Walia (2013), a member of No One Is Illegal-Vancouver Coast Salish Territories, suggests that one way migrant justice movements grapple with the contradictions inherent in the Status for All campaign is by challenging the state-centric framings of their struggles, “such as “Immigrants are American too” or “Refugees want to enjoy the freedoms of Canada,” that buttress the legitimacy of the state and its illegitimate foundations in settler colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and oppression” (76). Walia asserts that these framings rely on a regime of state-sanctioned rights, state-perpetuated myths of tolerance and benevolence, and state-enforced assimilation that use citizenship status, the border, and the denial of Indigenous sovereignty as techniques to maintain the normative whiteness of the settler state (Walia 2013). In adapting their political framing of anti-deportation campaigns as a challenge to the legitimacy of the settler state rather than a demand that the settler state recognize and
include migrants (at least rhetorically) No One Is Illegal groups seek to align their fights for migrant justice with place-based assertions of Indigenous sovereignty.

A second way that No One Is Illegal groups have attempted to integrate a decolonizing framework into their politics is through the development of local Solidarity City campaigns. What differentiates Solidarity City from anti-deportation campaigns or the broader Status for All campaign is the focus on building community autonomy and power to resist the enforcement of immigration legislation at a local level. In doing so, No One Is Illegal is better able to challenge the legitimacy of the settler state’s immigration policy. They hope that by seeking “regularization from the ground up,” these campaigns can have the long-term impact of creating settler/non-Indigenous spaces (commons) that have significant affinity with Indigenous struggles for sovereignty and self-determination (Kamal and Mishra 2007; Gardner 2017).

The solidarity city/sanctuary city model of organizing first developed in Toronto in 2005. The concept was adapted from migrant justice campaigns in the United States where activists sought to establish “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policies in their cities – meaning that anyone should be able to access essential municipal services without being asked to produce immigration status or be reported to immigration enforcement if they do not have documents. Cities such as Cambridge, Massachusetts and San Francisco, California already had long-standing policies that functioned in such a manner. In Toronto, however, No One Is Illegal sought to push the community autonomy aspect of this campaign because it could be framed as both a struggle to gain access for migrants to essential services in the city while at the same time denying the legitimacy of the
Canadian state’s immigration policies - in many respects a struggle for the commons.

With varying levels of success, this campaign of non-cooperation has given migrant justice activists an entry point for discussions with Indigenous communities on how to build anti-colonial campaigns in urban contexts that seek to imagine decolonial relations of autonomy that exist outside of the settler state’s regulation of Indigenous and migrant bodies. In questioning the Canadian state’s monopoly over access, status, and belonging, these campaigns open up the possibility of re-imaging immigration policy through relationship building with Indigenous nations. Bhatia (2013) explains that the existence of living and ongoing practices of immigration protocols among Indigenous nations and the multiple treaties in which co-existence outside of immigration has been negotiated serve as a potential opportunity for collaboration between precarious migrants and Indigenous nations seeking to challenge the sovereignty of the settler state.

At the same time it is going to take much more dialogue and discussion to ensure that these campaigns are not seen as disrespecting the immigration protocols of Indigenous communities and to assuage the legitimate fears Indigenous peoples have of more settlers and migrants laying claim to Indigenous territories and resources (Lawrence & Dua 2005). There remains a large gap between goals and reality, but the shift away from direct appeals for state recognition through local “Solidarity City” campaigns provides a window of opportunity to re-imagine relationships of solidarity that do not inherently legitimize the state. In contrast, they point to a widespread disinvestment from the state as a vehicle for long-term revolutionary change and a refocusing of our relationships to land and responsibilities to the Indigenous communities on whose
territories we struggle. No One Is Illegal groups have also committed to direct support for ongoing Indigenous sovereignty struggles as central to their day-to-day political practice. Through this imperfect work and despite a number of challenges organizers within No One Is Illegal aspire to develop long-term relationships with Indigenous sovereignty activists in which many of these questions and contradictions can be worked on more mindfully.
Adrangi, Maryam. July 17, 2013. Vancouver BC
Ahooja, Sarita. October 29, 2013. Montréal, QC
Aikenhead, Thor. May 21, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Banks, Annie Morgan. August 15, 2013. Oakland, CA
Bayard, Clare. August 20, 2013. San Francisco, CA
Brownlie, Jarvis. May 24, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Burke, Nora Butler. October 30, 2013. Montréal, QC
Burrill, Fred. November 1, 2013. Montréal, QC
Cooke, Dylan. August 17, 2013. Oakland, CA
Henaway, Mostafa. October 31, 2013. Montréal, QC
Henderson, Leah. March 4, 2013. Toronto, ON
Higgins, Cleve. October 30, 2013. Montréal, QC
Hussan. February 22, 2013. Toronto, ON
Kidane, Luam. March 11, 2013 and December 27, 2014. Toronto, ON
Kulchyski, Peter. May 28, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Lordes, Essex. August 27, 2013. Oakland, CA
Luckey, Ariel. August 26, 2013. Oakland, CA
Lyon, Sharrae. March 12, 2013. Ottawa, ON
Macdougall, Greg. March 11, 2013. Ottawa, ON
Milan, Kim Katrin. April 14, 2013. Toronto, ON
Moore, Hilary. August 26, 2013. Berkeley, CA
Morales, Li. August 27, 2013. Oakland, CA
Paterson, Alex. May 27, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Pauline, Dixie. August 26, 2013. Berkeley, CA
Rebick, Judy. March 15, 2013. Toronto, ON
Shaheen-Hussain, Samir. November 1, 2013. Montréal, QC
Singh, Jaggi. October 30, 2013. Montréal, QC
Sjoberg, Kate. May 22, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Weinberg, Alon. May 26, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Welch, Michael. May 23, 2013. Winnipeg, MB
Woolnough, Monique. March 14, 2013. Toronto, ON

*All interviews were conducted in person with the author.
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