

**Review of Benally, Klee. 2023. No spiritual  
surrender: Indigenous anarchy in defense of  
the sacred**

Alexander Dunlap

**Klee Benally. 2023. *No Spiritual Surrender: Indigenous anarchy in defense of the sacred*. Detritus Books. 406 pp. US\$20.00 (Paperback), ISBN 978-1-948501-28-6**

Why has political ecology ignored Indigenous anarchism? While there are a few exceptions, researchers across social science are confronted with an uncomfortable issue. Academia tends towards fetishizing, even instrumentalizing, Indigenous peoples in their projects. Meanwhile university publishers crank out volumes on “decoloniality” and “the geopolitics of knowledge” that essentialize Indigenous peoples (see Dunlap, 2022). All the while, Indigenous anarchism, or anarchists for that matter, gain little-tono acknowledgement within environmental movements. Why? Indigenous anarchy means being on the “frontlines,” engaging in unmediated attack against colonial, statist, extractivist and capitalist structures: as they are often one and the same. “Indigenous anarchism,” Klee Benally writes, “presents the possibility of attack: It is the embodiment of anti-colonial struggle and being” (2022a: 24). It’s safe to say, however, that the last thing Benally (among others) wanted is more academics chattering, objectifying and commodifying of Indigenous anarchism—“it doesn’t and should not exist” to be mapped, controlled and absorbed into the grid of the state (p. 344). Then why write about Indigenous anarchism in general, let alone in academic journals behind paywalls?

Simply said, it is important to remember that people— Indigenous and non-indigenous—are fighting here, now and against all odds: Demonstrating, even if incompletely, that *the impossible is possible*. Benally’s message, experience and imperative to attack remains a fundamentally important reminder for all those that want to be more than a ‘cog’ in the colonial, capitalist and extractive machine. In this *Journal of Political Ecology*, this means making academic inquiry a bit more honest—if not serious—in generating knowledge to undo these extractivist horrors, big and small—a concern at the core of political ecology. *No Spiritual Surrender: Indigenous anarchy in defense of the sacred* by Klee Benally presents a life in struggle, committed to autonomous direct action in defense of the sacred—Mother Earth and its inhabitants. Benally (1975–2023) was a Diné (Navajo) musician, craftsperson, artist and founder of Indigenous Action Media (2001), Outta Your Backpack Media (OYBM), Táala Hooghan Infoshop (2007) and, along with their family, fought against settler colonial invasion since their birth. Having written numerous influential pamphlets, *No Spiritual Surrender* was Benally’s first book. While the latter section of the book republishes some of those recent pamphlets (Benally, 2017, 2021, 2022a, 2022b), this remains the minority of the text within this extensive volume.

Declaring an “anti-colonial anti-politics” (p. 7) the introduction begins with a caveat and warning. Readers are alerted to an autobiographical drift, “redundancies and inconsistencies” related “to some pieces being written at different stages in my life” (p. 8) and demarcates a political caution for the readers to digest. “If you’ve read this book and found ways to improve your activism,” Benally states, “then you’ve read it wrong. When I speak of liberation, it is not to foment yet another social justice project, it is an inclusive and fervent agitation against domination and exploitation of existence” (p. 9). *No Spiritual Surrender*, said simply, is a confrontation with traditional activism and mainstream social movement politics.

Starting from Benally’s childhood, the chapters in Section One narrate growing “up in the crucible of the asymmetric slow burning war of resource colonialism” (p. 16) in the US Southwest. The daily hustle, family relations, and finding punk rock blends with observing Indigenous politicians, settler colonialism and enclosure by golf courses, tourism, powerlines, uranium mines and

coal power plants in northern Arizona. The dissection of the political technologies of settler colonialism, criticism of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and why “decolonizing academia” is a fallacy” (p. 29) are themes explored in this section, but are revisited throughout the book. Benally ends the section by weaponizing the words of Patrick Wolfe, as they assert “that it is the responsibility of those who wage anti-colonial struggle to break with static infrastructures of settler colonialism and make it become an event” (p. 34).

Juxtaposing the US recognition of Indigenous Sacred Sites with being arrested for protecting them on the same day, Section Two reviews the past and present “spiritual war” to degrade and assimilate Indigenous people by desecrating Indigenous territories into the so-called United States. Benally threads a journey of political becoming with the history of warfare against Indigenous Nations to reflect on their contribution to applying the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) to protect the San Francisco Peaks (*Dook’o’oosliid*). Through a discussion of their legal and direct-action struggle to defend “The Peaks,” in Flagstaff (*Kinlání*), Arizona, Benally offers an ardent critique of UNDRIP and, later, the ‘Rights of Nature.’ “Carrying a piece of paper with the UN’s words printed on it,” Benally reminds us, “doesn’t stop bulldozers, I’ve tried” (p. 59). In this section, chapters detail the struggle for the San Francisco Peaks, the No Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) Struggle at Standing Rock, South Dakota, and, to a lesser degree, The Longest Walk 2, 2008.

Among other references, these examples provide a platform to critically dissect the Non-profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), the green economy, and the Climate Justice movement. “The Climate Justice movement’s strategies and tactics are circumscribed by liberal obsession with emphatic political lobbying (on national and international levels) and media coverage. The underlying framework marches toward further inclusion in, and progression of, settler society” (p. 141). The final section chapter reflects on the history, tradition and politics embedded within frybread. Benally equates frybread to the colonial system and writes: “it may help us survive for a moment but if we keep consuming it will ultimately kill us” (p. 159). The lessons and discussions within these chapters are a gift, showing the predictable failure and arrogance of liberal activist strategies, how cultural hierarchies disable Indigenous movements and the way “the sacred” was crafted at Standing Rock (and beyond) to pacify ardent land defense (p. 116). Finally, Benally points out how patriarchy remains an enduring issue within autonomous movements.

Section Three moves into resistance and attack. Further building on their experiences and critiques in previous chapters, “Indigenous-Rooted Direct Action” (IRDA) is presented as a framework for autonomous unmediated attack. IRDA, Benally explains, “is about directly (without a mediating entity) asserting and maintaining Indigenous lifeways and power to inform and shape the relationships and narratives that impact our ways of being” (p. 167). Providing a tactical and strategic overview, the dichotomous myths about violence/nonviolence, “the outside agitator” (p. 173), duel/counter-power and rumor spreading (e.g. “bad jacketing”) are challenged and debunked. This entails extensively reviewing security culture protocols and “decolonial solidarity”—“Solidarity means action” (p. 199). Benally, moreover, offers an impressive critique of intersectionality, demonstrating instead the necessity of “interrelationality,” which “opens up a more comprehensive space to engage with relations beyond human societies, it urges us to meaningfully consider non-human beings, spirits, and Mother Earth” (p. 212). The following chapters discuss the creation of the Táala Hooghan Infoshop as a “conflict infrastructure” (p. 220), while the remaining ones are dedicated to refuting liberal political strategies. Two chapters breakdown how voting is a political trap and, contrary to popular belief, is “not harm reduction” (p. 240). “This

means the more we're [Indigenous people] enfranchised the more we're assimilated," explains Benally, "In terms of Indigenous existence, to put it more bluntly: *no matter who you vote for settler colonialism wins*" (p. 235). Continuing this theme, the final chapter shows that Indigenous Peoples' Day is nothing more than colonial collusion and a token pacification effort.

Benally's anti-political intensity only continues in Section Four which explores Indigenous Anarchy and the deleterious circumstances created for Indigenous peoples. Statistics on health, food and extractives are reviewed, while condemning the settler colonial degradation of Turtle Island.

At the cost of our health and destruction of Mother Earth, politicians on the Navajo Nation have perpetuated and profited from coal-fired power plants and strip mines that have caused forced relocation of more than 20,000 Diné from Black Mesa and severe environmental degradation. (p. 291).

Indigenous Marxists are also brought to task. "This re-contextualizing of Marx and Engels' political reactions to European capitalism does nothing to forward Indigenous autonomy," contends Benally (p. 310), it "inherently alienates diverse and complex Indigenous social compositions by compelling them to act as subjects of an authoritarian revolutionary framework based on class and industrial production." The next chapters turn to advocating Indigenous Anarchism. This, however, was not without critique. While reviewing the formation of Indigenous anarchism, Benally, as referenced above, stresses the necessity of Indigenous anarchy remaining evasive—"it doesn't and should not exist" (p. 344)—and with a combative anti-colonial practice of attack (see also Benally, 2022a).

The next chapter revisits this issue of history and colonial political control, specifically how colonial governance, or "nation-state structure" (p. 349), has been forced on Indigenous people to maintain the colonial system. "Indigenous political sovereignty was manufactured by colonial forces with the specific intent of containing, controlling, and civilizing," says Benally (p. 351). Indigenous politicians, academics and Trumpers are brought to task for their negligence, antics and complicity with ecocide. The final chapter, playing on the Renzo Novatore essay title, "Towards the colonial nothing: Settler destruction is ceremony," ties the whole book together. While lambasting decolonial liberalism, Benally bashes hope for preserving "institutions of domination and exploitation" (p. 369) and, as the chapter title suggests, outlines how "destroying internalized and external colonialities is ceremony" (p. 373). The chapter confronts the manufactured social death, endemic in Indigenous communities, by calling for ardent resistance to compost settler colonialism—"destroy what destroys us" (p. 374)—"to restore our lifeways, heal our communities, and the land" (p. 311). This chapter includes a revisitation of punk rock, engagement with queer nihilism and calls for the revival of imagination. Additionally, this chapter includes criticisms of Glen Coulthard<sup>1</sup> and, to a lesser degree, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. "If history is written by the conquerors," Benally (p. 405) reminds us, "it will be unwritten by those who refuse to be conquered."

Benally does not mince words, offering clarity and patience to inexperienced and politically challenged readers. *No Spiritual Surrender* calls out "the bullshit" that has so many people confused, working against themselves and advancing colonial/statist structures. Benally poetically—

---

<sup>1</sup> Indigenous academic and author of *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

and without hesitation— unravels in great detail the mechanics of colonial/statist pacification. Particularly relevant to political ecologists, but also a general public, is the detail by which the NPIC, Indigenous politicians, FPIC, decolonial academics, social and climate justice movements are rightfully brought to task. Benally's experience and patient hostile reflection makes this book a cherished weapon to be treated with care and used against settler state existence, its defenders and its false critics. Benally's hostility and criticisms, not to mention engagement with anti-political (insurrectionary) theory, remains profoundly refreshing—undoubtedly sharpening daggers for insurrectionary political ecology and anyone unafraid to use them “against domination and exploitation of existence” (p. 9). This book is a must read for those feeling a fire inside their stomachs to end the suffocation of institutions, police violence, and the poisoning and destruction of habitats. This combination of Diné practices, political experience, movement knowledge, and engagement with critical theory makes Benally and this book exceptional.

While the book is extensive, verging on an anthology, the mixture of novel critique, coining terms, Diné anarchism and anti-colonial venom kept this reader engorged and eager for more. *No Spiritual Surrender* is a refreshing (Indigenous) anarchist intervention, meanwhile providing urgently needed criticisms—if not hostility—to the ideas, mechanisms and people that, in a word, sustain ecocide. Benally expresses what many cannot; whether from lacking the ability, experience or from fear of disturbing their middle-class life. Benally confronts the Red Nations' authoritarian Marxism and their “woefully limited anticolonial response” with the “Red New Deal” that rebrands “their Marxist organization's proposition for a ‘decolonized’ authoritarian worker-run state as the best solution” (pp. 137–138). Benally, moreover, challenges Indigenous essentialism and colonial collaboration, reminding readers that “there are Indigenous fascists, capitalists, conservatives, socialists, anarchists, nihilists, extractivists etc.” While occasionally political ecologists might fare better at understanding this point, this is an important reminder that too often Indigenous authority and leadership becomes homogenized—centering identity politics over political substance.

A reoccurring target throughout the book are decolonial academics, “Indigenous liberals” (p. 232), politicians and NGOs. Benally came to reject working with “local Indigenous non-profits” (p. 150) because “Indigenous organizations measure their accomplishments based on how well they're recognized, funded, and included in colonial order” (p. 159). *No Spiritual Surrender* deconstructs the micro-politics of colonial pacification with the upmost precision. This includes discussing “Redwashing” (p. 105), which we can understand as tokenizing Indigenous people, culture and authority to advance statist governance and extractivism. Destroying settler colonialism/statism, or crafting intellectual tools for this endeavor, is the principal objective of the book. This requires discarding Indigenous authority complicit in maintaining colonial politics, who express themselves by working to pacify militants and control political tactics and strategies. Discussing Standing Rock (Chapter 5), Benally gives us a tool to distinguish this abuse of Indigenous authority by distinguishing between “elders” and “olders” (p. 108). Benally explains further:

Broadly speaking, elders are held in high regard because they represent customs and standards (principles) for our ways of life. But not every older person in a community and movement space is an elder. While elders make mistakes, those who reach old age yet impose their influence over and attempt to control others are what those in circles I organize with call ‘olders.’ This is not a new contention as the legacies

of abusive movement elders (particularly some associated with AIM), exploitative medicine practitioners, and sell-outs are well known in our circles. (p. 108)

Pushing aside colonial traps and collaborators, Benally reminds us, what really matters is action: upholding the medicine, defending the sacred and dismantling settler colonialism by every means. *No Spiritual Surrender* is a reminder that everyone has an interest in anti-colonial struggle, whether they know it or not.

## References

- Benally, K. (2017). "Uprooting Colonialism: The limits of Indigenous Peoples' Day." Indigenous Action Media. <http://www.indigenouaction.org/wp-content/uploads/uprooting-colonialism-zin>
- Benally, K. (2021). "COVID-19, resource colonialism & indigenous resistance." Indigenous Action Media. <https://www.indigenouaction.org/covid-19-resource-colonialism-indigenous-resis>
- Benally, K. (2022a). "Unknowable: Against an Indigenous anarchist theory," Indigenous Action Media. <https://www.indigenouaction.org/unknowable-against-an-indigenous-anarchist-the>
- Benally, K. (2022b). "Voting is not harm reduction: An Indigenous perspective." Indigenous Action Media. <https://www.indigenouaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Voting-is-Not-Harm-Reductio>
- Dunlap, A. (2022). "I don't want your progress! It tries to kill... me!" Decolonial encounters and the anarchist critique of civilization." *Globalizations*, 1–27. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.207>

---

Xander Dunlap is a postdoctoral research fellow at Boston University, USA, and a visiting research fellow in the Global Development Studies Department, University of Helsinki, Finland. Their work has critically examined police-military transformations, market-based conservation, wind energy development and extractive projects more generally in Latin America, Europe and the United States.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Alexander Dunlap

Review of Benally, Klee. 2023. No spiritual surrender: Indigenous anarchy in defense of the sacred  
2024

Retrieved on February 19, 2024 from  
<[journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/jpe/article/id/6005](https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/jpe/article/id/6005)>  
Published in *Journal of Political Ecology* Volume 31, Issue 1.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**