



Resistance to Tren Maya by Francisco De Parres Gómez.

responding symbolisms that help structure our cultural identities as Maya. Along with other politically aligned communities, we began filing lawsuits in response to those projects and lodging complaints against this land occupation. That was the beginning—20 to 25 years ago. Other development projects began after that, including pig farms, which breed thousands of pigs and occupy large spaces across Maya territory. Pig farms are built in what is known as the Ring of Cenotes in Yucatán, the most precious water reservoirs that we have here in the Peninsula. Pig waste was thrown into the cenotes, causing massive pollution. Today, out of approximately 250 farms, only 20 are legal; all the rest are illegal and mired in corruption.

Another megaproject appeared later: the construction of **aeolic and photovoltaic parks** for the production of renewable energy—“clean energy,” they say. This also **involved the invasion and displacement of entire communities**. Then companies building large hotels and restaurants in places attractive to tourists—like patches of jungle, archaeological sites, cenotes—showed up. They began appropriating and turning these places into sites for mass tourism, which create pollution because tourism isn’t always sustainable.

As we were putting up this fight, the current government began the so-called **Tren Maya**, or Maya Train, a 1,554-kilometer intercity railway project that pierces through the Yucatán Peninsula and connects the rest of the country with the world. We called on communities that disagree with these megaprojects and organized ourselves in response. The initial idea was to spread information and raise awareness, but this gathering ended up becoming an assembly named *Múuch’ Xiinbal*, which means *walking together*, and we began working as a collective defending Maya territory.

**The Abolitionist:** *As abolitionists, we want this issue to amplify the intersections between prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition and ecological justice. How are struggles for land and food sovereignty linked with a larger movement toward decolonization and agroecology? How do they challenge the conditions of confinement, surveillance, and control that characterize and constitute the PIC?*

**Pedro:** One way of decolonizing or confronting colonization is continuing to grow our own food, speak our own language, and ensure that corn remains our healthy staple, which is so important to us, and **educating our children** about our beliefs, our celebrations that are, in general, agricultural and related to the spirituality of the rain, the wind, the mountains, the water. This allows us to maintain our heart as people, a heart

that is capable of clear thinking and is part of the territory that is being defended. It is not just a matter of land; it is a matter of territory, of territorializing. We believe that if there is a strong Maya identity, then there will be a Maya people for a long time, even if colonization clashes head-on with this strong Maya identity, this strong Maya language and spirituality. This is why we maintain our way of being as Maya people. This is why we face militarization, too. We face charges of “organized delinquency” and public policies of co-optation, which are programs that the government has spread across the train’s path to control people—counterinsurgency strategies against people who disagree with these projects of death targeting the Maya people.

**“One way of decolonizing or confronting colonization is continuing to grow our own food, speak our own language, and ensure that corn remains our healthy staple, which is so important to us, and educating our children about our beliefs, our celebrations that are, in general, agricultural and related to the spirituality of the rain, the wind, the mountains, the water.”**

When we think about land, we see how people in the West think about resources, think about money, think about those things that are useful for them not only for living but also for creating wealth in an anthropocentric sense. For them, the destruction of nature yields greater development. **For Maya people, land is not necessarily territorialized by being made into capital.** The territorialization of land is what we *do along with it, in coordination with it, building* community and *communion* with it, not profit. In this sense, territorializing land through indigeneity rather than capitalism means making it an Indigenous territory through a relationship of spirituality, of respect—a moral, familial, and political relationship that is lived in such a way that one can no longer make a distinction between land as territory and the people with whom one lives. In other words, we are not beings juxtaposed with the earth but rather beings that correspond with the earth. A territory is more than land, because words, thoughts, celebrations, dreaming, struggle—these are also territory. This is how we understand the territoriality of our land.

**The Abolitionist:** *Could you talk about some of the ongoing threats and challenges that the movements you are part of are currently facing and how you are organizing to actively resist them?*

**Pedro:** There is an ongoing struggle against the devastation of the jungle and the cenotes (which are underground caves with water, sacred in Maya culture, where they represent duality). We have a government that is incapable of dialogue. It does not listen; it only dictates. The “Maya Train” robs us of our name; they call it Maya, and we cannot understand why. If this project succeeds, then perhaps the only Maya that will be left will be the train and not us. The train causes real damage and destruction. It is like a projectile aimed right at the heart of Maya culture. The Maya Train is not something separate but encompasses all the megaprojects in

the Yucatán Peninsula and their relation to the rest of the country and the world. For example, the person or businessman growing soy can use wagons on the train to transport their crops. The person who raises pigs has a train to carry soy to their pigs and then to sell their meat even in China because the train runs into the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The person who produces renewable energy has a train to sell it. Real estate agencies have a train to attract tourism.

The *Múuch’ Xiinbal* Assembly is a popular assembly made up of directly affected communities. We are not a nongovernmental organization, nor do we request resources from foundations because foundations have their own policies and often do not understand what we do; rather, they only subsidize what is in vogue. We said that we wouldn’t engage in dialogue with political parties either, that we wouldn’t play into government’s or state’s hands, and that we don’t want to be associated with religion. All of us in the Assembly work voluntarily; anyone can come and go whenever they please because the only thing that unites us is our will. There won’t be a legal registry because we do not need one since *the land is not to be sold or leased*.

**The Abolitionist:** *In your opinion, what does this moment demand of us? What lessons can we learn from Black and Indigenous ways of knowing, of tending to life, and of being in relationship to land? How can readers across prison walls put those lessons into practice?*

**Pedro:** There is a sort of brutality today, a stupefaction of humanity at all levels. Those who kill more people are rewarded even with the Nobel Peace Prize. I think what is going on is outrageous, what is taking place in Palestine and in many other places where people are being killed. Meanwhile, the president here is committing **ecocide** where we live. We believe it is important to begin reflecting on who we are, who we are going to be, what we are going to do with our children, and what kind of thinking and heart we are going to leave our children with in a world that is now full of lies.

We are living in a complex situation in which the first and most important victim is life itself. Those of us closest to the razor’s edge are the Indigenous groups, whom the West perceives as useless, “backward,” and “weak,” with “idle lands.” They say, “I just don’t understand why they want to look after that mountain if it’s idle and is not producing anything.” And we reply, “Where does honey come from? And the bees, the birds, and the animals?” Their perspective is based on their insistence on putting a cash price on everything, whereas we see the mountain from the point of view of the pleasurable and fulfilling life we want to lead.

We see that the greatest risk is that our language, our culture, and ourselves as a people begin to disappear. We defend our territory by strengthening our identity as Maya people. In this sense, we need to know, think, feel, and believe ourselves to be Maya and reclaim that way of living—our way of feeding ourselves. ♦

**About the Author:** *Pedro Uc Be is part of the Assembly of Defenders of *Múuch’ Xiinbal* Maya Territory and of the Indigenous National Congress. He has been on the frontlines of the struggle to stop megaprojects that are destroying many ecosystems and that attempt to displace and expropriate Maya communities from their land.*

FEATURES ACTION

# Indigenous Abolitionist Fire Futures: Cultural Burns in California

By A, Tony Marks Block, and Billy Ray Boyer

**Billy Ray Boyer (B):** Please share a bit about **who you are, and what brought you to this work** at the intersection of (wild)fires and Indigenous and anti-colonial resistance in California.

**A:** Being an Indigenous person, it just is what it is; Indigenous life inherently threatens the se-

curity of the state and the validity of the government. We are a constant looming threat, and one way of controlling us and our existence is criminalizing things that are essential to our livelihood. The US stole my family’s land. They made our language illegal. Resistance is a natural reaction to all that violence. California missions burning down got me interested in fire as

a way of healing and re-connecting to land, recognizing that fire is also politically used in a lot of powerful ways.

**Tony Marks-Block (T):** What brought me to this work was my own family’s anti-colonial struggle and solidarity with Indigenous struggle globally. Growing up in California, I was interested in how Indigenous communities’ relationship to land was a key component of the anti-colonial struggle. My family’s relationship to the state and the prison system got me thinking about how prisons have been used to criminalize Indigenous life and culture. Through my work in solidarity

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with Karuk and Yurok peoples, I learned about the importance of fire for sustaining Indigenous cultures and landscapes. My ongoing relationship with Karuk and Yurok peoples inextricably informs my worldview and analysis of fire and the prison industrial complex (PIC).

**B: What is the history and purpose of controlled, cultural, prescribed burning as a practice within Indigenous communities?**

**A:** It looks different for every community, but my understanding of cultural burning is an ancestral practice of using fire to tend to the land and be in a good relationship with the land that people are from. There's a lot of plants that rely on fire, a lot of culture, whether it's weaving materials or food, that also relies on fire, so there is an entire scientific practice that's been cultivated for millennia. Yet the criminalization of fire is reproduced in everything from Smokey the Bear to keeping people from the land in general.

**"Fire is integral to Indigenous livelihood. Especially in California, Indigenous peoples continue to be extremely reliant on "wild" foods medicines and fibers whose abundance and qualities are enhanced when they are burned."**

**T:** Fire is integral to Indigenous livelihood. Especially in California, Indigenous peoples continue to be extremely reliant on "wild" foods medicines and fibers whose abundance and qualities are enhanced when they are burned. This includes other-than-human relations and relatives such as salmon, oak acorns, deer, elk, and other plants that produce seeds, stems, roots, and tubers. For example, the understory of oak trees is burned to eliminate pests and to make it easier to gather acorns, and meadows are burned to increase forage for deer and elk. Burning also increases the amount of surface water in creeks that allows salmon and other fish to reproduce and survive in the dry season. **Without the use of fire, we see many of these habitats are in decline and threatened,** much like Indigenous culture has been negatively affected by forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands. These colonial outcomes contribute to the crisis upon us now with massive wildfires that are extremely destructive, consuming everything at high severity and threatening the ecological systems that people rely on. The capitalist and colonial systems don't allow people to live locally due to the dispossession of colonial privatization. It forces communities to compete on a global level and get everything they need from global markets. As a result, communities are forced into greater alienation from the land, and Indigenous cultural fire, among other things, is less frequent and widespread. Indigenous peoples need to be able to have access to land and be able to practice these time-tested practices that are fundamental to Indigenous culture, land, and survival.

One of the ways Indigenous peoples describe their culture is that it is **"fire dependent."** But, the colonial state and capital want people to be dependent on them to maintain their wealth and power, so the state severs fire-dependent relationships through its policies of fire suppression and land dispossession. **Bringing fire back is then a struggle for Indigenous independence and autonomy.**

**B:** I appreciate both of you grounding us in thinking about the way that the settler state approach is to categorize and organize everything into distinct categories to control them. That interconnectedness and interdependence you're talking about is always seen as a powerful threat.

Tony, you spoke about the real escalation in massive wildfires in California. We often see the PIC deployed as a reaction to these fire emergencies. We know that prisoners made up 30 percent of all wildland firefighter crews in California, and that number is growing. **What are some key differences between these carceral responses to**



"Cambium" by Pete Railand, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

**fire and the indigenous practices we were just talking about?**

**T:** What A said earlier about the mission system is important for this question. It was Spanish colonization that brought the first prison system in California – the missions where Indigenous peoples were used as enslaved labor to support the Spanish colony, Alta California. During colonization and the mission system, the Spanish governor of California outlawed Indigenous burning, in part because he saw Indigenous peoples could be independent if they were able to burn.

Fire was a threat to maintaining control over Indigenous labor in the missions. Indigenous peoples responded to enslavement by burning the missions down. **The blueprint was written right there in the mid 1700s when the Spanish first came, and the missions were burned as the first prisons in California.** For so long, Indigenous burning was derided as something that was savage or inferior. Indigenous burners, or fire lighters, have been labeled as arsonists under the colonial system, when they're taking care of the landscape, and making sure it stays healthy.

Fire threatens the reproducibility of capital. Settler capitalists have chosen to interact with the earth by maximizing the number of certain trees of a certain species on the landscape to maximize profits, after the Anglo-colonization of California, timber production became one of the primary reasons why the colonial state decided to eliminate and suppress fire. To ensure the expansion of the capitalist, colonial project worldwide, the use of timber was vital for various war efforts (eg the expansion and development of the colony in California, and in the Philippines), and so the forests of California that had formerly been cared for by Indigenous peoples were stolen for this purpose. Settlers thought that they could eliminate fire and that this would help their timber plantations. Trying to control the environment in this way leads inevitably to disaster. Post-WWII, surplus war technology is applied to the earth for fire suppression. A massive investment in planes, bulldozers, and chemical retardants are then routinely poured on the earth to protect capital through suppression. This technology and mindset are borrowed from the military, so it makes sense that such inhumane technology that is used to commit genocide worldwide contributes to other-than-human extinctions as well. But these technologies are often ineffective at protecting capital from fire without human labor on the ground.

**"Fire threatens the reproducibility of capital."**

**A:** I think that the word that you used earlier, autonomy, is the key difference. **Autonomy for whom?** If you're thinking about fire and interacting with fire, traditional, cultural ways are very respectful. It's the autonomy of all living things involved, including fire as a living thing, versus forcing people who are imprisoned, who have the least amount of autonomy into this situation, to "fight" fire. It's a pretty stark contrast.

**B: How have Indigenous communities who are engaging in these burning practices been targeted by the PIC, and what strategies have been effective at resisting the criminalization of cultural burning and the larger destruction of Indigenous ecosystems? What strategies do you think could be deepened or developed further?**

**A:** When you think about the US as a whole, it was stolen Indigenous people from Africa being forcibly removed and brought to this stolen land to create the foundation for this entire state to continually and intergenerationally enact violence in so many different ways. Back in the day, my people were setting Spaniard ships on fire, and that's resistance to the destruction of Indigenous ecosystems. People were poisoning missionaries' food, or the first anti-work movement in California where people in the missions said, "Fuck that, I'm not doing that," and it worked.

**T:** Presently, being on an imprisoned fire crew in California is in some ways thought of as better than being in a prison yard for imprisoned people. But it's a way that the state divides the communities that are in prison and encourages compliance through the incentive of marginally better living conditions.

**With a disproportionate overrepresentation of Indigenous people in California locked up, we need to understand prison as a key tool in taking away the autonomy and economic self-sufficiency of Indigenous peoples.** Hundreds of years after the mission system, they are still stolen and captured and then used to support a fire suppression system which struggles to recruit people to work in it. **Why?** Because the work is extremely backbreaking, and the conditions are inhumane. If you have been in prison "fighting fire" then you are taught to see fire as an enemy. It feeds into this macho approach to dominating and controlling the earth.

And so, while the state is now shifting (at least rhetorically) to say that it supports Indigenous fire, **there remain a number of hurdles for Indigenous peoples to actually burn autonomously.** There's so many different laws and bureaucracies that Indigenous people must navigate, including that they don't have access or jurisdiction to their lands. Often, Indigenous peoples are not the landowners, or if they did burn on areas that are their historical lands, then they would be confronted with vigilante opposition from settlers or they would be challenged by the police.

Because of the ways in which the state holds power, a lot of Indigenous peoples are forced to engage in "collaboration" or partnerships with state agencies. **Strategically, Indigenous people have been bringing people together who work for formal fire agencies** or even jobs within the fire suppression system, to burn with them to generate better understanding of Indigenous practice and philosophy. Indigenous peoples are trying to create a movement of folks who are reconnecting with the land in a different way, because unfortunately there are so many laws that govern burning.

There are a variety of autonomous networks of Indigenous peoples that are trying to reclaim ancestral knowledge and share it internally, to ensure next generations have a different relationship with fire than generations that were not taught so that they wouldn't be targeted by the state. It might not be a protest in the street, but it is a lot of the resistance. Because for so long all of this knowledge and land has been stolen, it's critical to let Indigenous folks lead. There's a lot of settler-type and environmental organizations that have done a lot of political work on fire that excluded Indigenous peoples. Instead, they should step back and put the resources where they're needed so that Indigenous people are not invited to the table only when it's convenient and tokenistic.

If you're engaging in land, fire, or water defense or protection, and it's challenging the state, you will likely get caught up in the carceral system. We have so many people from various direct action and protection movements against pipelines, dams, etc, that are doing time as a result. It

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continues to be a tool the state uses, and it really is effective in that it encourages people to be less confrontational tactically. We don't need more people behind prison walls. Using state-sanctioned ways to achieve these goals often doesn't really lead to what the people need. At the same time, those tactics may keep people at home with their loved ones. These are real challenging tensions that organizers need to grapple with.

**B:** I'm curious what you both think about the 2021 senate bill that codified cultural burning practices, and how that has or hasn't changed things. **Is it resulting in meaningful collaboration? Is it the state trying to look progressive but not actually allowing the leadership of Indigenous people to guide?** I say this with the full sort of caveat that I know none of us expect the state to save us.

**A:** Shout out to people who worked on that bill! Speaking for myself, I just don't really hold my breath for anything that the government does. Ultimately, the state will never allow for its own downfall.

**T:** Critical Resistance (CR) talks about reformist reforms versus steps toward abolition. I believe that some folks trying to get the state to reform its fire policies are doing so from a radical place and to create greater Indigenous sovereignty.

**B:** So what does an abolitionist and anti-colonial future look to you regarding relationships between land, fire, people, and the state?

**A:** I would say people and land coming together to set fire to the state. The concept of getting land back has been majorly co-opted. **How are**



By Jess X Snow, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative.

**you making people pay for something that you stole?** It blows my mind reckoning with the fact that a lot of these concepts were co-opted almost beyond recognition from their original form. The phrase "land back" started with some young urban natives in Edmonton, Canada; they just went and took some land back. Even just rethinking our approaches in the future and fighting for a future where seven generations from now, our descendants could feel the effects of all the love and resistance that we're working towards now. And always paying all love and respect to those generations prior who had to endure and fight through everything that they went through too.

**T:** Some of the answers are already in existence, wherein Indigenous peoples have greater au-

tonomy. There's overlap between the Indigenous movement of land back, of bringing fire back, that is in direct alignment with an abolitionist, anti-colonial future. It's more a question for abolitionists in terms of trying to build a skillset around taking care of the land and how abolitionists see that as a part of their practice.

There's also a lot to learn from Indigenous peoples on the margins of the colonial-capitalist system in other parts of the world where fire suppression is less pervasive. There are parts of the world where people are able to burn freely, which allows them greater independence. Because fire autonomy is one of the ways people retain their freedom, we need to build and maintain those connections with fire even if we've been trained not to. A, I hope we interact in real life soon, maybe even lighting a fire or two. ♦

**About the Authors:**

**A** is an Indigenous (Chamorro) young person born and raised in occupied Yelamu also known as San Francisco. They are involved in urban land projects with an affinity for their local Native community, and they like to focus on herbal knowledge and Native plants. Above all else, they are passionate about sparking anticolonial fires in their world.

**Tony Marks Block** is a settler scholar and fire practitioner, who teaches and studies critical fire ecology at California State University, East Bay, in the unceded lands of the Chochenyo Ohlone peoples. Tony was a member of CR Oakland from 2008 to 2013.

**Billy Ray Boyer** is an abolitionist harm reduction organizer and facilitator living in Lenapehoking/Philadelphia. They have been a member of The Abolitionist Editorial Collective since 2017 and CR since 2015.

# "WE AREN'T GOING ANYWHERE" A History of Blocking Boats

By Dylan Brown and Billy Ray Boyer

For decades, people across the globe have mobilized to stop vessels from embarking on genocidal and ecologically destructive missions. Blocking boats is a powerful tactic that has been used successfully across geographies and social movements. This photo essay highlights historic moments—ranging from anti-whaling campaigns by Greenpeace to direct actions in solidarity with Palestine—in which organizers across disparate regions and movement sectors took to the seas, targeted ports, and put their bodies on the line to achieve their demands. The US military is the single largest institutional source of greenhouse gas emissions in the world, according to Brown University's Costs of War Project. Therefore, we feature images from the environmental and ecological justice (EJ) movement and anti-war demonstrations to highlight how direct-action tactics are shared across struggles, as well

as how imperialist wars and militarism accelerate the degradation of land and our ecosystems.

As the military industrial complex continues to expedite global climate collapse and ecological disaster, boat-blocking has been a strategy deployed by both anti-war and EJ organizers throughout movement history. Tools of the prison industrial complex (PIC) are also repeatedly used in attempts to crush resistance by boat blockers—through physically harm, arrests, imprisonments, and sanctions. Yet in the face of mounting repression, forces of ecological devastation are met with organized resistance globally across time. The people's tactic of blocking boats remains powerful and relevant as organizers stay committed to advancing a new political and ecological horizon for our world.

Continues on page 25



Photo by Brooke Anderson | @movementphotographer