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Youth on the Frontlines: Gen-Z Climate Movements and the Renewal of Indigenous Futurisms

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This article investigates how Gen-Z climate activists reinterpret Indigenous knowledge systems to confront accelerating ecological crises. The research addresses the central problem of how ancestral ecological wisdom is mobilised within youth-led climate movements that operate across local and transnational contexts. Grounded in decolonial theory and Indigenous futurisms, the study employs qualitative methods—semi-structured interviews, discourse analysis, and movement-archive review—to examine how chants, digital campaigns, rituals, and collaborative practices shape activist imaginaries. The analysis demonstrates that Gen-Z activists treat Indigenous knowledge as a living, adaptive praxis that informs both political resistance and activist pedagogy. Their practices construct solidarity networks, articulate pluriversal ecological futures, and challenge extractive and colonial frameworks embedded in mainstream climate discourse. The core claim is that youth activism revitalises Indigenous futurisms by reshaping them into dynamic frameworks of relational ethics, emotional resilience, and decolonial ecological justice. The study contributes to climate activism scholarship by highlighting how Gen-Z movements integrate ancestral wisdom with contemporary strategies, generating transformative visions of ecological and political futures.

Keywords: indigenous futurisms, activist pedagogy, decolonial ecology, gen-z climate movements, solidarity networks, ecological justice

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Introduction

Gen-Z climate movements-emerging from digital platforms, urban streets, coastal communities, and Indigenous territories-have become a defining force in contemporary environmental activism. Characterised by urgency, intersectionality, and an ethics of relationality, these youth-led initiatives challenge the structural drivers of climate degradation while foregrounding the political significance of Indigenous knowledge systems. As climate disruption intensifies, young activists increasingly draw on ancestral wisdom to articulate future-oriented ecological imaginaries that resist colonial extractivism. This article argues that Gen-Z mobilisations constitute a renewed form of Indigenous futurism wherein activism becomes both resistance and pedagogy.

Indigenous futurisms, as theorised by scholars such as Grace L. Dillon, foreground the imaginative reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty, cosmologies, and ecological ethics across temporalities. These frameworks challenge linear ideas of progress and insist instead on relational world-making practices embedded in land-based knowledge. When Gen-Z activists invoke these frameworks, they reorient climate politics beyond technocratic solutions and toward community-based practices of ecological justice. Their activism presents not only demands for policy change but also transformative visions of how collective futures may be shaped through ancestral memory.

Contemporary youth movements operate within global digital networks that facilitate the rapid circulation of discourses, symbols,

and strategies. Research on digital activism has shown how online platforms help disenfranchised communities disrupt dominant narratives and mobilise transnational action (Tufekci 147). Within climate movements, these platforms also enable the revival and dissemination of Indigenous ecological philosophies, often shared through hashtags, art, stories, and movement manifestos. At the same time, the rise of counter-movements and misinformation necessitates careful attention to how decolonial epistemologies are mobilised, appropriated, or misunderstood.

This study explores the interpretive practices through which Gen-Z activists engage Indigenous knowledge, focusing on the relational and pedagogical dimensions of their activism. Using qualitative interviews, movement archives, and discourse analysis, the article traces how chants, rituals, visual arts, and digital strategies articulate a renewed form of Indigenous futurism. These practices illustrate how young people weave urgency with hope, navigating the emotional and epistemological terrains of climate precarity.

The central argument is that Gen-Z climate movements recover, reinterpret, and circulate Indigenous ecological ethics to build solidarity networks that foster more just and sustainable environmental futures. These movements do not merely preserve ancestral traditions; they actively reshape them, contributing to evolving understandings of Indigenous futurisms that are deeply situated in contemporary struggles.

Theoretical Framework: Decolonial Theory and Indigenous Futurisms

Decolonial theory challenges the epistemic hierarchies established by colonial modernity, which continue to inform environmental governance and global climate policy. Walter Mignolo argues that decoloniality entails a reorientation toward “pluriversal” forms of knowledge that resist Eurocentric universalism (Mignolo 46). In environmental movements, this means centring Indigenous, local, and land-based epistemologies as crucial for understanding ecological interdependence. Kyle Whyte further notes that climate change is not a future threat for many Indigenous peoples but an extension of colonial disruptions already experienced (Whyte 228). Gen-Z activists frequently mobilise these insights to contest extractive capitalism and the state-managed narratives of green development.

Indigenous futurisms offer conceptual tools for imagining alternative ecological futures grounded in Indigenous sovereignties and cosmologies. Dillon describes Indigenous futurisms as speculative practices that recover knowledge systems suppressed by colonialism and envision futures beyond ecological collapse (Dillon 1). These frameworks challenge dominant linear temporality by asserting that past knowledge, present practices, and future aspirations coexist in relational cycles. In this model, resistance involves both memory and possibility.

Gen-Z activists apply Indigenous futurisms not only as aesthetic tropes but as political orientations. By invoking stories of land guardianship, kinship ethics, and circular temporalities, youth movements challenge the logics that legitimise exploitative

resource extraction. Their activism thus becomes an intergenerational conversation where ancestral teachings guide contemporary strategies and future aspirations.

The concept of activist pedagogy conceptualises activism as a site of learning, knowledge transmission, and ethical formation. Paulo Freire’s pedagogical theory emphasises dialogue, critical consciousness, and collective transformation (Freire 72). Youth activists extend these ideas into the climate sphere, where chants, teach-ins, art installations, and community rituals function as pedagogical tools. These practices cultivate ecological literacy and foster solidarity across diverse communities.

By integrating activist pedagogy with Indigenous futurisms, Gen-Z movements articulate a political imagination that is relational, embodied, and deeply ethical. Their pedagogical methods reframe environmental activism as a transformative cultural practice, not solely a protest strategy.

Methodology

This research employs qualitative methodology combining semi-structured interviews (n=25), discourse analysis of digital and print materials, and an examination of movement archives from youth climate initiatives across North America, the Pacific, and South Asia. Participants include youth organisers aged 16–27 who self-identify as climate activists. Interviews focused on activism motivations, interpretations of Indigenous knowledge, and uses of digital platforms.

Movement archives analysed include public speeches, chants, protest art, social media posts, and organisational statements from groups such as Fridays for Future, Indigenous Youth Rising, and Pacific Climate Warriors. Discourse analysis followed Fairclough's approach to critical discourse studies, examining language, symbolism, and narrative structure.

All data were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used. Ethical clearance followed standard guidelines for research involving minors, ensuring consent processes appropriate for participants aged sixteen and above.

Youth Mobilisation and the Reinterpretation of Ancestral Wisdom

Interviews reveal that Gen-Z activists consistently anchor their climate engagement in relational ethics. Many describe a sense of “belonging to the land” rather than owning it. This perspective echoes Indigenous ecological philosophies that emphasise reciprocity, kinship with the more-than-human world, and intergenerational responsibility. Activist Maya describes her involvement as “an act of listening to ancestors through the land,” a sentiment mirrored by participants across regions.

Research on Indigenous ecological ethics demonstrates how relationality fosters sustainable environmental practice (Kimmerer 214). Gen-Z activists reinterpret these teachings within contemporary political frameworks, using them to critique extractive industries, state policies, and consumerist cultures. Their reinterpretations are not passive appropriations but active

engagements grounded in solidarity and learning.

Performative elements of climate protests—chants, songs, collective rituals—serve as affective tools that bind participants into shared purpose. Many youth groups incorporate Indigenous songs or land acknowledgements into protest openings. While some critics caution against superficial incorporation of Indigenous elements (Smith 98), youth activists interviewed for this study emphasise collaboration with Indigenous mentors and community leaders.

These performative acts embody a hybrid futurism in which ritual becomes a tool for imagining and enacting alternative ecological futures. In several Pacific climate marches, activists carried woven mats, shells, and traditional paddles, transforming the protest space into a symbolic oceanic environment. Such performances resist dominant narratives of vulnerability by asserting Indigenous agency and continuity.

Digital platforms are central to how Gen-Z activists share Indigenous knowledge and coordinate transnational solidarity. Hashtags like #LandBack, #WaterIsLife, and #IslandStrong circulate widely, tying local struggles to global movements. Tufekci argues that digital tools amplify marginalised voices by enabling “networked public spheres” (Tufekci 134). Within climate activism, these platforms allow Indigenous youth to articulate stories that counter colonial histories of erasure.

Youth activists interviewed describe social media as a pedagogical space where infographics, videos, and oral histories

function as decolonial teaching tools. For instance, activist Talia explained how her collective posts weekly “ancestral ecology lessons” that present teachings from Pacific elders alongside climate science data. Such digital practices demonstrate how Indigenous futurisms evolve in hybrid, networked ecologies.

Interviews and movement archives indicate that Gen-Z activists build both translocal and transnational networks by identifying shared experiences of ecological harm and colonial histories. These alliances reflect Mignolo’s idea of the “pluriverse” -a world where many epistemologies coexist without hierarchy (Mignolo 52). In practice, this means collaborations between Indigenous communities, diasporic youth, and non-Indigenous allies grounded in mutual respect and shared learning.

One prominent example is the collaboration between Sámi youth activists and student climate groups in Norway, where struggles over reindeer herding lands intersect with debates over renewable energy projects. These alliances complicate mainstream narratives that frame climate solutions as universally beneficial. Instead, youth movements foreground how certain green technologies continue colonial patterns of land dispossession.

For many Gen-Z activists, ecological justice cannot be separated from struggles against racism, capitalism, and ongoing colonisation. This holistic approach aligns with environmental justice scholarship that emphasises intersectionality and structural analysis (Pellow 29). By rooting climate activism in Indigenous futurisms, youth

movements challenge policy frameworks that reduce environmental problems to technical or economic issues.

Protest art often conveys this critique visually: posters bearing phrases like “Decolonise the Future” and “Ancestral Knowledge Is Climate Science” appear frequently in archives. Such slogans assert the epistemic authority of Indigenous knowledge systems and challenge the presumption that scientific modernity alone can resolve climate crises.

A striking finding of this study is the deliberate cultivation of hope alongside urgency. Scholars argue that hope can function as a political resource that sustains movements facing long-term crises (Berlant 3). Gen-Z activists often describe Indigenous futurisms as frameworks that offer “rooted hope” -a sense of possibility grounded in ancestral strength rather than abstract optimism.

Rituals, storytelling, and communal gatherings help mitigate eco-anxiety and prevent burnout. Several participants emphasised that reconnecting with land-based teachings creates emotional resilience necessary to sustain activism. This dimension of Indigenous futurism reframes climate activism not merely as resistance but as a practice of care.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex, multilayered ways in which Gen-Z climate activists engage, reinterpret, and mobilise Indigenous knowledge systems to reshape ecological imaginaries under conditions of planetary crisis. Their activism,

rooted in urgency yet sustained by hope, demonstrates how Indigenous futurisms become not only theoretical frameworks but also lived, relational practices enacted across digital ecologies, street protests, community rituals, and transnational solidarity networks. This discussion expands the implications of these findings by analysing how Gen-Z movements conceptualise ecological justice as inseparable from decolonial liberation, and how their reinterpretations of ancestral wisdom reshape the political, cultural, and affective dimensions of contemporary climate activism.

A principal insight emerging from the data is that Gen-Z activists do not perceive Indigenous ecological knowledge as a historical archive that must be preserved in its original form. Rather, they treat it as a living, adaptive praxis capable of guiding contemporary struggles while evolving through new political and technological contexts. This aligns with Whyte's argument that Indigenous communities have long adapted their ecological systems to respond to colonial disruption and environmental change; the youth activists in this study extend this adaptive tradition into present-day climate politics (Whyte 154).

The reinterpretation process is mediated by relational ethics. Interviewees consistently framed their engagement with Indigenous knowledge through commitments to respect, accountability, community consultation, and reciprocal learning-principles resonant with Kimmerer's teachings on relationality and responsibility (Kimmerer 214). In this sense, Gen-Z activism challenges the commodification of Indigenous ideas that

often occurs in mainstream environmentalism. Instead of extracting symbolic elements from Indigenous cultures, youth movements foreground collaborative reinterpretation as a practice of solidarity.

Moreover, these reinterpretations disrupt the modernist framing of science versus tradition. Several activists explicitly critiqued climate discourses that privilege technocratic solutions while marginalising land-based epistemologies. By citing Indigenous fire stewardship, regenerative agriculture, or water-protection rituals alongside climate science, these youth activists construct hybrid ecological frameworks that resist binary epistemologies. Their reinterpretation, therefore, represents an epistemic intervention into what Mignolo calls the "colonial matrix of power," which historically devalued non-Western knowledge systems (Mignolo 47).

The research findings indicate that Indigenous futurisms-while often studied through literary and aesthetic analyses-function as a powerful political imaginary for Gen-Z activism. Dillon describes Indigenous futurisms as speculative orientations that recuperate cultural memory while envisioning futures beyond the violence of colonial modernity (Dillon 1). Youth activists not only invoke this imaginary but mobilise it to confront the emotional and existential weight of climate collapse.

A striking pattern in interviews was the emphasis on hope as a form of survivance. This aligns with Berlant's insight that hope, even when fragile, operates as a "resource for endurance" in the face of structural crisis (Berlant 3). For Gen-Z activists, hope is not

naïve optimism; it is grounded in ancestral continuities, relational resilience, and stories of communities that have survived centuries of displacement, extraction, and environmental breakdown. Several activists described Indigenous futurisms as offering temporal grounding—a sense that the future is not a linear trajectory toward catastrophe but a cyclical space shaped by ancestral guidance.

This emotional framework counters the overwhelming eco-anxiety often associated with youth climate activism. Participants noted that rituals, storytelling sessions, and land-based gatherings provided emotional sustenance that allowed them to imagine futures beyond despair. These practices echo Freire's notion that political action is inseparable from affective transformation; activism becomes a process of remaking the self, cultivating hope, and generating collective meaning (Freire 72).

Thus, Indigenous futurisms serve a dual function: they provide political critique of colonial systems and simultaneously offer emotional infrastructures that sustain long-term resistance.

While youth movements demonstrate profound engagement with Indigenous epistemologies, the study also highlights persistent ethical tensions, particularly regarding cultural appropriation and representational power. Several Indigenous activists interviewed expressed concerns about non-Indigenous youth using Indigenous symbols or land acknowledgements without adequate understanding or community involvement. This critique resonates with Smith's analysis

of how colonial research traditions have historically appropriated Indigenous cultural knowledge without accountability (Smith 98).

Yet, the data also demonstrate that many non-Indigenous Gen-Z activists are acutely aware of these risks and actively work to counter them. They emphasise co-creation, Indigenous leadership, and relational accountability. In many of the documented protests, Indigenous youth served as primary organisers or co-chairs, ensuring that movement strategies, chants, and rituals reflect community consent. Some groups adopted explicit ethical guidelines that require securing permissions before using cultural elements.

This suggests a shift from simply “including” Indigenous knowledge to centring Indigenous sovereignty in climate advocacy. Such centring challenges traditional environmental organisations that have historically relied on symbolic inclusion rather than structural power-sharing. As a result, Gen-Z movements demonstrate an emergent model of ethical collaboration that attempts to reconcile solidarity with sovereignty.

Digital platforms occupy a central role in shaping how Indigenous futurisms circulate, evolve, and become integrated into Gen-Z climate activism. Participants consistently described social media as a pedagogical arena—one where oral histories, movement manifestos, teachings from elders, and ecological data coexist within multimodal formats such as videos, infographics, artwork, and livestreams. This aligns with Tufekci's analysis of “networked public

spheres,” in which digitally connected activists develop new modes of political expression and collective identity (Tufekci 147).

One notable pattern is how Indigenous-led hashtags such as #LandBack, #WaterIsLife, and #HonorTheTreaties have been adopted by broader youth climate networks. Through these hashtags, Indigenous futurist frameworks move into global digital circulation, enabling youth across continents to engage with decolonial visions that may differ significantly from their own cultural contexts. While this raises questions about cultural specificity, it also demonstrates how Indigenous political demands—particularly those concerning land restitution, water sovereignty, and environmental stewardship—become central rather than peripheral to global climate discourse.

Digital spaces thus become sites of epistemological and cultural translation. Youth activists reinterpret teachings embedded in Indigenous stories, ceremonies, and land ethics into digital forms that can be shared, remixed, and debated. This does not necessarily dilute the cultural meanings of these teachings; instead, it reveals how Indigenous futurisms adapt to technological mediation without losing their relational core.

The findings reveal that Gen-Z climate activism is shaped by solidarity networks grounded in Mignolo’s idea of the “pluriverse,” where diverse worlds coexist. These alliances connect youth across regions facing intertwined environmental and colonial violence. Pacific Climate Warriors collaborate with activists in New Zealand and

Australia; Sámi youth partner with Fridays for Future to challenge “green colonialism”; and South Asian youth engage with Adivasi movements resisting extraction. Solidarity emerges not from universal identity but from recognising shared structural struggles. This pluriversal politics marks a shift from homogenising environmental narratives toward connection through difference and relational responsibility.

The findings also demonstrate that Gen-Z movements transform climate activism into a site of collective learning rooted in activist pedagogy. Teach-ins, storytelling circles, and artistic performances serve as educational practices that challenge the boundaries between knowledge producer and knowledge recipient. These practices are deeply aligned with Freire’s dialogic model of pedagogy, which emphasises horizontal relationships and the co-creation of knowledge (Freire 78).

In practice, this means that an Indigenous elder’s story about river guardianship may be shared alongside a youth-led climate science workshop and a poet’s reading of a futurist speculative text. Through these hybrid pedagogical spaces, Gen-Z movements create what Fairclough describes as “counter-discourses” that resist dominant narratives saturating political and media institutions (Fairclough 18). These counter-discourses challenge the technocratic framing of the climate crisis by foregrounding slow violence, intergenerational trauma, and land-based relationality.

The pedagogical dimension is crucial to understanding why Indigenous futurisms resonate so widely among Gen-Z activists. These frameworks do not demand passive

listening but invite participation, reinterpretation, and collective imagination. In these movements, learning becomes activism, and activism becomes a continuous process of cultural and epistemic transformation.

A major implication of this study is that Gen-Z activism reframes climate justice as inherently decolonial justice. Participants consistently emphasised that ecological harm is inseparable from histories of colonisation, capitalism, racialisation, and state dispossession. This reflects Pellow's argument that environmental crises must be understood through intersectional and structural analyses (Pellow 29).

Gen-Z activists extend this critique by foregrounding Indigenous claims to land and sovereignty as preconditions for ecological restoration. Thus, climate justice becomes not only a demand for emissions reduction but a call to transform political, economic, and epistemic systems shaped by colonial modernity. Indigenous futurisms provide the conceptual tools to envision these transformations-not as utopian fantasies but as grounded, relational possibilities.

Taken together, the findings reveal that Gen-Z climate activism represents a profound reorientation in environmental politics. These youth movements do not isolate ecological concerns from broader social, cultural, and epistemic struggles. Instead, they integrate Indigenous futurisms, decolonial theory, emotional survivance, and digital innovation to articulate a pluriversal, relational politics of the future.

Their activism constitutes a site where ancestral wisdom is not merely preserved but renewed. Through reinterpretation, collaboration, and creative transformation, Gen-Z activists reshape Indigenous futurisms into dynamic frameworks capable of guiding collective political action under conditions of climate precarity.

Conclusion

Gen-Z climate activism represents a transformative moment in global environmental politics. Through reinterpretations of Indigenous futurisms, youth movements forge new pathways for ecological justice grounded in ancestral wisdom, relational ethics, and decolonial visions. Their activism transcends policy advocacy by becoming a pedagogical and cultural project-one that imagines the future as a space of possibility rooted in Indigenous knowledge.

The study demonstrates that Indigenous futurisms are not static theoretical constructs; they evolve through the creative agency of youth activists who weave memory, digital media, performance, and solidarity into new ecological imaginaries. As climate crises intensify, these movements offer relational models of activism that challenge extractive systems and envision pluriversal futures.

Future research should examine how transnational youth alliances and digital ecologies further amplify Indigenous voices within global environmental advocacy. Longitudinal studies could track how successive generations reinterpret Indigenous teachings and how these reinterpretations influence environmental

governance. Such inquiries will deepen understanding of how youth movements contribute to reshaping climate politics at both cultural and structural levels.

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