

---

**Zoltán Grossman. *Unlikely Alliances: Native Nations and White Communities Join to Defend Rural Lands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.**

<http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/books/GROUNL.html>

As I write this, from what is currently called the state of Utah, United States, a struggle is taking place. Tribal activists are working to oppose the stripping of federal protections under the National Antiquities Act of massive sections of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments. A coalition of Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, and Ute people, among others, are protesting the reduction of that National Park by some 85% by the current US president (undoing the creation of the park created under the Obama administration). His administration hopes to open the space to uranium and oil extraction. The fight to protect the park's initial boundaries will rage for some time, and it is likely that tribal opposition alone will not secure their protections. Allied politicians and non-Native Utahns and Arizonans have entered the fray as well. Nonetheless, many of the region's non-Native (and overwhelmingly white) residents oppose the National Park designation, feeling those lands should be made available to cattle ranching, and often welcoming the jobs that might accompany the aforementioned extractive enterprises.

We've seen such tensions before, of course. Time and time again Native people fight on the front lines of protecting their land, often in the face of vocal (and frequently violent) opposition from their white neighbors, whose livelihoods draw upon those threatened lands. We are so used to this narrative that we often assume it to be the natural order of things. Enter: Zoltán Grossman's book, which examines examples of Native and rural white alliance and cooperation resisting ecological degradation.

Such a project is fraught with pitfalls. When I first picked up the book, I worried that it would wander down a path of multicultural feel-good cherry-picking, or worse, tales of white folks riding in to save Native people from themselves. Fortunately, Grossman's text offers something far more nuanced and more realistic, replete with stories of successes and failures. These stories emphasize Native sovereignty as a multifaceted good, in the face of ongoing histories and legacies of white settler ideologies that in a few hard-fought cases seem to abate. Grossman asserts his thesis overtly:

I hope this book functions as a type of guide to Native and non-Native community organizers and leaders in the beginning stages of building alliances against new mines, pipelines, or other projects, to see precedents elsewhere in the country and what strategies have worked and not worked. I also hope that the book can stimulate discussion among students, faculty, and researchers studying innovative ways to alleviate racial/ethnic conflict, create populist movements across cultural lines, and roll back the centuries of dispossession and colonization of Indigenous nations (xv-xvi; the Preface is also available in its entirety [online](#)).

In each of these goals, it succeeds. This is not a how-to sort of textbook though, at least not in terms of an abc checklist. Rather, it serves as a text of recent history, an ethnography of the kinds of organizers Grossman hopes to support. *Unlikely Alliances* offers four traits that seem to recur as necessary for the success of those alliances in securing their aims. Grossman's findings come over the course of examining dozens of Native/non-Native alliances. In each successful instance,

the alliances were able to 1) build grassroots rather than only institutional relationships, 2) emphasize local place identity, 3) define local place in territorial (rather than social) and inclusive terms, and, 4) recognize and respect particularist (rather than universalist) identity differences (287-88). Ultimately, the examples Grossman offers create an interesting, valuable, and useful text for people working with or interested in Native American rights and sovereignty, environmentalism, coalition building, and activism broadly speaking. It is a text that largely anticipates readers' concerns (especially those regarding Native issues), but also one that seems to struggle with escaping certain settler positions—perhaps by design. This text offers itself as a pragmatic guide, and, as such, its ideology tends to privilege finding *immediate* solutions for the crises it addresses. This immediacy is fitting, of course. Ecological threats aren't the kind of thing that can wait to be resolved. *Unlikely Alliances* is also, ultimately, a hopeful text, one that celebrates a kind of progress in these alliances. Grossman explains, "The collaboration of Native Americans and rural whites to defend their common home against outside interests was a rare anomaly in the 1980s....But by the 2010s, cooperation between Native and non-Native rural organizers [became] almost commonplace" (273).

The breadth of Grossman's work is impressive and laudable, melding history, law, and ethnography. The reader encounters an extensive and impressive host of interviewees (just over one hundred). Among these are "sport-fishing group leaders and fishing guides, farmer and rancher group leaders, tribal government leadership, Indigenous elders, Native community organizers, and rural white community organizers, schoolteachers, small business owners, and others" (7). Moreover, the scale and breadth of the interviews, topics, and regions covered serves to bolster Grossman's claims. The text moves about the Pacific Northwest, Intermountain West, Northern Plains, and Great Lakes covering a wide array of topics: spear fishing, legal interventions (especially the Boldt decision), dams and dam breaching, resistance of military projects (base expansion, low-level flights, the MX missile system), Environmental Justice, coal and gold mining, Black Hills preservation and treaty rights, climate justice, pipelines (including KXL and DAPL), coal locomotive transportation, ports, and oil terminals. Grossman discusses movements for environmental protection ranging from the 1970s to the contemporary moment.

The chapters tend to follow a pattern that introduces a particular environmental struggle and its major players, discusses attempts, successes, and failures in alliance building (all via interviews with parties involved), and concludes with a quick listing of related, nearby, and later examples that mirror those successes and failures. In the early chapters that listing can come off as a bit jarring: so many rapid-fire details, facts, and figures. But, as one gets further along, one comes to expect them and to understand what Grossman is doing with them; namely, strengthening his claims with abbreviated examples that parallel the longer examples at the chapter's opening.

Grossman describes successful collaborations as going through four broad and not necessarily distinct phases. "First, Native peoples asserted their autonomy and renewed nationhood. Second, a right-wing populist backlash from some rural whites created racial conflict over the use of land, water, or natural resources. Third, the racial conflict declined in intensity as the neighbors initiated dialogue over common threats to land and water. Fourth, Native and white neighbors collaborated on the protection of their community, livelihood and natural resources using a cross-cultural anticorporate populism" (5). In example after example, these phases play out, and this is one of Grossman's most interesting findings. Native people wielding or enacting their

sovereignty comes first. Indeed, the text demonstrates that in circumstances where Native nations were more eager to acquiesce to settler expectations of them, less forthright about their sovereignty, the alliances generally failed. He notes that this was, more often than not, followed by a white backlash. We might wonder, of course, whether we can really call anti-Indian racist actions a backlash when they are sown into the fabric of our nation. After all, they didn't spring up as a result of Native actions; they have been enacted and reinforced in settler ideology. Grossman's text does make these last points, demonstrating, for example, the irony of white people who protested Indigenous sovereignty lamenting their own loss of land.

Along with the four phases discussed, Grossman identifies three primary connections that allow these alliances to succeed. "First, they address the common 'sense of place' of Native and non-Native communities" (6). That is, they draw on a shared connection to physical landscape (these connections may be material and/or spiritual). "Second, they examine the common purpose of the communities in facing a common enemy" (6). These alliances refuse to be divided, for example. Throughout the text the common enemy tends to come in the form of corporate extractive industries. (I found myself wondering whether the same practices of vilifying Indigenous people were at play in the psyches of their white neighbors mobilizing against not only the toxification of their communities, but the *people* involved with those industries.) "Third, they explore the common sense of understanding that could extend beyond a short-term alliance of convenience to long-term cooperation" (7). The most successful cases Grossman studies show formerly adversarial relationships blossoming into friendships, or at least relationships of true respect.

One of the strengths of the text, and one of the ways that it allays fears that it will engage in the kinds of ethnographic treatment of Indigenous peoples common in so much of academic writing, comes in the form of Grossman's self-awareness and self-reflexivity. In the Preface foregrounding his own positionality as relates to his project, Grossman narrates that he is descendent on his father's side of a Hungarian Jewish family, many of whom did not escape murder at the hands of Nazis. Owing at least in part to this familial history, he explains, "I learned to mistrust cultural pride and difference, because of the horrors it could lead to, and to instead find and appreciate *similarities* among peoples that transcend religious, ethnic, or racial divides" (xii). Oh no, we might think, this *is* going down that multicultural road. However, Grossman quickly assuages some of those concerns. He goes on to explain that his mother's side of the family, also Hungarian post-WWII immigrants, retained much of their culture, including their language and food (retentions facilitated by living in "Buffalo's large Hungarian community"), and connections to their former "small village in western Hungary" (xii). One could go so far as to argue that Grossman is either having some fun with those readers who would likely be suspicious of a universalist text, or drawing in those who would be attracted to one, setting them up for a more complicated position. Either way (or neither way) the device works. Grossman's book has an uncanny way of anticipating a reader's objections, of starting down one of those dangerous paths only to veer back, to correct any homogenizing narratives one might worry it is drifting into.

The text's central ambivalence seems to center around the binary it constructs from its inception, its attempt to simultaneously embrace universalism and particularism. While *Unlikely Alliances* works to fix these as mutually constitutive, and does so fairly well in the conclusion if not

throughout the entire body of the text, it seems mainly to vacillate between them—again, seeming to topple over into multiculturalism and then wobbling back away from it. Grossman asserts, “Many [scholars] are deconstructing racist institutions and structures, but fewer are discussing how to construct just institutions and structures in their place” (10). He continues, “fewer have speculated what ‘geographies of inclusion might look like’” (10). This longing for inclusion smacks of the liberal multicultural state impulse. But, what if the inclusion of settler descendants like Grossman (and myself) isn’t what justice looks like? What if the mandate of such inclusion is a replication of, or at least a not-so-distinct riffing off of, those racist institutions and structures? Right on cue, Grossman cites Glen Coulthard, noting that “appeals to ‘common ground’ accommodation fail to acknowledge that the ‘commons’ has belonged to Indigenous nations” (11).

Ultimately, Grossman’s book hinges on the concept of cooperation, specifically privileging grassroots organizing over governmental alliances. He argues, “Cooperation needs to sink roots into local communities to sustain government-to-government relations at the top” (52). His examples point to these local connections as the primary mode by which successful alliances not only come to be, but prove fruitful moving forward as well. He contends, “A ‘paradigmatic shift’ toward lasting relationships that promote justice can prevent the regeneration of social tensions” (62). In many of the alliances he studies, those involved come to see one another as friends. They recognize that if they want a better neighborhood, they need to be better neighbors. Grossman refers to these grassroots interactions as connecting “on a human level” (91). (One wonders how humans have ever connected on a non-human level, but I digress). By contrast, he contends that when people have foregrounded “‘government-to-government’ cooperation at the top [in hopes of translating that] into cooperation at the grassroots” the results have been mixed (57). Moreover, “Where tribes had the backing of urban-based environmental groups but not local white communities, such as in the Little Rocky Mountains, the alliances could not prevent mining” (149). Again, according to Grossman, success lies in a coalition of the local.

It is important to note that this emphasis on building alliance between Native and non-Native communities does not mean that Grossman looks to weaken Native sovereignty. Instead, as he demonstrates, the unyielding exercise of that sovereignty by Native nations is absolutely integral to the successes of the alliances he studies. Indeed, he points out a clear danger to this approach of prioritizing Native/Non-Native alliances. As one of his informants reminds him, “White people are once again ‘using’ something owned by Native Americans, in this case treaty or sovereign rights, for their own ends—to stop a project that may threaten their livelihoods” (279). With that in mind he also contends that “The most successful alliances [brokered by Native communities] have tended to use a ‘carrot-and-stick’ strategy—using a ‘stick’ to confront racism by white communities and institutions, while dangling a ‘carrot’ that promised a common future based on common land-based values” (150). While Grossman looks to the successes of alliance and community, his reading is hardly naïve. He offers no post-racial fantasy here, far from it. To that end, he contends, “Native nations do not have to compromise their sovereignty in some feel-good reconciliation scheme with the state. Instead, their sovereignty cements their position as a powerful entity in their own watershed or even... as the ‘lead entity’” (97). And, “Instead of accepting the white community’s terms of one-way ‘inclusion’ (meaning official recognition and integration), the tribal nations began to set their own terms of *mutual inclusion*, including a projection of tribal powers in resource management outside the reservations” (272).

Grossman's text offers valuable insights for people thinking through the empowerment of Native communities particularly, rather than marginalized communities broadly, as this centrality of sovereignty plays such a pivotal role. It's a useful text for thinking about coalition building, a mode that some reject for the compromises it requires. It also, honestly, has some very sweet stories of people working not only with, but for one another. It manages these feel-good moments without sacrificing rigor. It calls out a brand of selfish yet self-destructive anti-Indian racism and white supremacist settler ideology throughout (though many of the white informants are far less self-aware than the text is). It's well worth a read.

*John Gamber, Utah State University*