# Meet the Ambassadors from Canada's Indigenous Fossil Fuel Resistance

*In 1885, a revolutionary leader wrote, "My people will sleep for one hundred years" and then wake up. In the "genocidal" wilderness of Canada's tar sands, that renaissance has begun.*

*Crystal Lameman (l) and Eriel Deranger (r). Photos by Ben Powless.*

The debate over the tar sands has heated up once again in the United States, with nearly 400 students arrested in a protest at the White House last weekend. The arrestees were demanding that the Keystone XL pipeline be stopped.

"We're bringing back ceremonies that haven't been [performed] in years. It's happening everywhere, not just in my community."

But First Nations groups in the heart of Alberta, the Canadian province where the tar sands are being mined, have been mounting what may be the most formidable opposition to the fossil fuel industry yet: a series of lawsuits arguing that the projects violate Canada's constitutional obligation to consult indigenous people on matters that affect them, among other legal claims.

In January, two representatives from these First Nations traveled on a speaking tour through New England—where a fight over a proposed tar-sands pipeline from Montreal to Portland, Maine, is just beginning—to remind those of us south of the border that every major regional tar sands pipeline from the East Coast to Texas originates in their homeland.

Crystal Lameman from Beaver Lake Cree First Nation and Eriel Deranger of Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation come from a place where ecological devastation is occurring on an astonishing scale. They are ambassadors from the front lines of the indigenous fossil fuel resistance.

But there's another part of their story, one that provides critical context for the indigenous movement that's growing at resource extraction sites around the world. It's the story of a cultural revolution that's quietly transforming indigenous life and politics—a movement of decolonization

and reclamation of language, land, and traditions. The tar sands fight is rooted in this reclamation, and therein lies its strength.

I spoke with both women on their tour through New England and was struck by the patterns and resonances in their stories. What follows is a pastiche, a composite of recorded conversations and excerpts from their talks to audiences in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Lameman and Deranger have worked hard to create more public space for the voices of indigenous people and women in particular; this is an attempt to further enlarge that space.

The first and most important thing to understand, they say, is their people's relationship to the land.

**Deranger:** Without land, water, and culture, we are nothing.

The river systems are the life, and … grandmother moon, grandfather sun— everything is alive. When you're raised with that relationship, that the foxes are your cousins and the eagles are your brothers, you start to have a totally different relationship and interaction with everything around you. And so much of humanity has lost that. But indigenous people have retained it somehow.

If you kill the land, the waterways, the air and culture of those people, you essentially kill those people. And that, in fact, is the definition of genocide.

Lameman and Deranger say that resource extraction on their traditional land is a continuation of the genocide that began when European settlers first came to North America and took different forms for different generations. Their parents' generation survived the residential school system—mandatory, government-run Christian schools known for brutal corporal punishment and designed to erase evidence of the "Indian" in native children.

**Deranger:** Our culture was only there by a thread. Many of our people were totally oppressed and broken through residential schools. My parents were a part of that. … We lost a whole generation of our culture and identity. But there are still these little beacons of hope that escaped those forms of oppression, and they're the ones that are guiding us back to those places that we come from.

**Lameman:** We're doing our best with what we are given to break free of those cyclical abuses that have plagued our people: assimilation, segregation, oppression, residential schools. And then from there came the drug and alcohol addictions. … But we're still in the evolution of learning a whole different way. It's learning, and also breaking.

How, then, did traditions get passed down—and how do you bridge the gap between tradition and the modern world?

**Lameman:** I'm fairly lucky, because I was raised by my *kokum*, my grandmother. … so I grew up with the old people. I grew up with the language around me. And that's where I differ greatly from a lot of people—in that I was raised in my culture, in my ceremony, in our ways of knowing and being. I was brought up with those teachings. And to this day, those teachings are what guide me.

**Deranger:** I always say I'm a half a generation removed from the land because I spent half of my life being very connected to the land and half my life in the city. … I have one foot in modern society and one foot in where I come from… We are people of the land and I can't escape that.

Lameman and Deranger are both in their early thirties, both mothers of young children. In a place where the fossil fuel industry threatens every aspect of traditional culture—culture that has existed, as they say, "since time immemorial"—they're working to pass down that knowledge to their children.

**Deranger:** I choose to live in the city of Edmonton for one reason: I have children. What's incredibly sad is that I don't want to take them back to my traditional community. I don't want them to be at risk for getting cancer. I don't want them to have to see the destruction of their homeland. It's very difficult for me because I want them to have that, but right now, the current industrial development on my territory is putting my family at risk. I have cousins, I have aunts, I have uncles who have died, who have become sick.

**Lameman:** If these pipelines go through, your government is going to further assist in the raping and pillaging of the lands of my ancestors, while deliberately ignoring the basic human rights of my children.

My children have a basic human right to drink clean water and breathe clean air. … We all need to stop pretending, with our eyes closed and our blinders on, going by day by day, pretending this is not happening. Because it is. And I'm here to remind you about that. There are people over there, and we are human beings too.

Deranger quotes the revolutionary leader Louis Riel, who in 1885 gave this prophecy: "My people will sleep for one hundred years. And when they awake it will be the artists who give them back their spirit." One hundred years have passed, she says, and the awakening has begun.

**Lameman:** We're involved in a revolution—an evolution—of the world's indigenous people. Everywhere, indigenous people are waking up.

We're bringing back ceremonies that haven't been [performed] in years. It's happening everywhere, not just in my community.

**Deranger:** Now our people are being educated. Now our people are starting to understand our rights. Now we're starting to have the confidence to assert those rights—and it's really only been in the last decade.

Indigenous people worldwide are in a process of decolonization, and reaffirming themselves as part of society. And that's what this indigenous uprising is all about.

Knowing where you come from is an important step for all of us, indigenous or not, Lameman says. Every culture honors its connection with the land in a different way. Celebrating this connection, in whatever tradition you're a part of, is one way to avoid the tendency to appropriate indigenous traditions.

**Lameman:** Every single person is indigenous. They all come from somewhere. And all these people need to go and reclaim their roots because everybody has roots from somewhere. … So let those guide you, and at least know about them. So you at least have a feeling of "I belong somewhere. I have people somewhere. I have ancestors somewhere. I have a history somewhere."

Where does your history end? You? How far back can you go? What can you tell me about your people? People always ask me that, but you?

So where are your roots? I know where mine are. They're up there—in what is now known as northern Alberta. I know where I come from. And we all need to start doing that if we're all going to somehow get past these atrocities that have happened. It's not only us that has to heal.

What part will people whose ancestors were settlers play in this process of decolonization? Both women say that in order to for the transition toward clean energy to be just and equitable, there need to be real partnerships between indigenous and non-indigenous people—and that while their First Nations are feeling the effects of tar sands mining most acutely, the long-range climate change effects will affect everyone.

**Lameman:** This is no longer an Indian problem. If you breathe air, and you drink water, this is about you.

**Deranger:** Indigenous people are in the process of finding themselves as well. A lot of people are in that process of decolonization—but you can also be a part of it. There's lots of non-indigenous people that are participating. It's about experiencing [the land] firsthand, understanding what it means to skin a rabbit, gut a fish. Experiential learning.

Appropriating the romanticized parts of indigenous culture is not the way to do that. One thing I always tell people is to go to a neighboring First Nations community and talk to them. It's not impossible… It's not like every native person has all the answers to the world. But we're really paying attention. Find those that do have that. Who are the traditional knowledge holders? There might be traditional knowledge holders in your own family; they exist everywhere in many different communities.