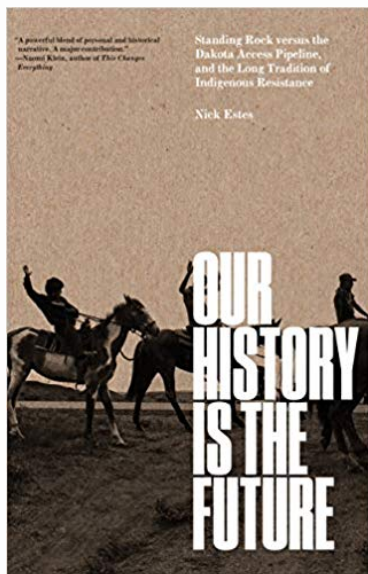


# Our History Is the Future

*Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline,  
and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*

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## Liberation

At Greasy Grass on June 25, 1876, Lakotas, Cheyennes, and Arapahos blew out the birthday candles a week before the United States celebrated its one hundred years of “liberty.” The Plains Indigenous alliance annihilated Custer and 268 of his men. Custer had launched the surprise attack on the large encampment to kill Indians and force them back onto reservations, in a perfect expression of the settler state’s death culture. The Indigenous encampment was, in contrast, a life culture, celebrating the annual renewal of life with a sun dance—a humble ceremony in which dancers sacrifice their bodies by fasting without food or water for four days in order for their nation and the world to live. Indigenous peoples from reservations had slipped away to join their relatives at the camp and enjoy a brief taste of freedom. US history books and popular culture typically depict the battle as “Custer’s Last Stand.” “The very earth seemed to grow Indians,” Colonel Marcus Reno later reported, “running toward me in swarms, and from all directions.” Put simply, they were surrounded.

In their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney draw from Michael Parenti’s anti-imperialist study of Hollywood films, which always portray colonization “upside down”: invasion looks like self-defense, and the settlers, hiding in their militarized forts, are the “real” victims of an encircling native aggression. Such a reversal of roles, in which aggressor becomes victim, is a make-believe national narrative that began when settlers first invaded Indigenous lands in North America and repeats itself every time the United States invades

or bombs another country in its overseas imperial project. Yet, Moten and Harney argue, it is simultaneously very much true that the settler is, in a way, surrounded and outnumbered.<sup>1</sup> While Indigenous peoples have been rendered a statistical minority within their own homelands, the power of Indigenous lifeways and resistance has always surrounded settlers in North America, along with their tenuous claims to land ownership. The perpetual threat of Indigenous nations is that they are a reminder of the settler's own precarious claims to land and belonging.

Ancestors of Indigenous resistance didn't merely fight *against* settler colonialism; they fought *for* Indigenous life and just relations with human and nonhuman relatives, and with the earth. When Custer and his men descended on the sun dance at Greasy Grass, the ancestors were dancing, as they have since time immemorial, to make the tree of life in Black Elk's vision bloom, and to ensure the rebirth of their people and the earth. In 2016, as construction of the Black Snake—the Dakota Access pipeline—began, they danced again, this time on the shores at Oceti Sakowin Camp and at Sacred Stone to protect Mni Sose (the Missouri River) and Unci Maka (Grandmother Earth). Indigenous resistance is not a one-time event. It continually asks: What proliferates in the absence of empire? Thus, it defines freedom not as the absence of settler colonialism, but as the amplified presence of Indigenous life and just relations with human and nonhuman relatives, and with the earth. To invoke the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, the refusal to accept the impossible condition of banishment and disappearance from one's homelands, and outright dispossession, structures the Indigenous political practice of return, restoration, and reclamation of belonging and place.<sup>2</sup>

Ancestors also danced during the initial planning stage of the Pick-Sloan dams on the Missouri River, before their sun dance grounds were flooded. Indian reservations and

Indigenous life were entirely absent from the original Army Corps maps and plans. When the Army Corps flooded our homelands and agency headquarters twice, our nation, the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, was forced to imagine how to reconstruct itself after flooding and relocation, and how to do so in a way that would reflect our values. We drew, and redrew, the layout of our community. New roads and water pipelines had to be planned and constructed. Entire cemeteries—our dead ancestors—had to be disinterred and relocated along with our living ancestors to higher ground. Planners ultimately chose a half-moon-shaped community structure, a symbolic gesture to traditional camp arrangements with an open community center surrounded by tipi lodges whose entrances opened east to the rising sun. In the center of the newly planned Lower Brule community was a school, emphasizing the importance placed on education. Fanning out from there were municipal and administration buildings, churches, a juvenile detention facility, and several outer rows of housing. While imprisonment and Christianity were foreign institutions to traditional Oceti Sakowin societies, the modern relocated community made and imagined space for youth incarceration and churches.

Like the Army Corps (and often working alongside them), the planners of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) imagined building a pipeline in a world where Native people did not exist. And they had to imagine us out of existence to justify trespassing on Indigenous territory and protected treaty lands. When the pipeline risked interfering with white residential areas in Bismarck, North Dakota, it was rerouted such that the danger of water contamination was outsourced to the downriver Native nation of Standing Rock. When DAPL sought protection of its private property and investments—the rights of way across the land—police and private security stepped in on their behalf, imagining Indigenous peoples as the threat. These were modern-day settlers surrounded by an



Indigenous-led uprising. DAPL's trespass through unceded treaty territory and the militarized crackdown on Water Protectors was made to look like self-defense—settlers in the fort, surrounded by hostile natives.

Police, military, and private security set up their own bases and planned their own theater of operations to wage low-level warfare against the prayer camps. In emails published by the *MuckRock* watchdog website, Toby Schweitzer, a helicopter contractor from Bakken Western, a quick-response oil spill and environmental cleanup company operating out of Mandan, North Dakota, sent an email on September 14, 2016, with the subject line "Israeli Crowd Control Method" to North Dakota probation officers working the #NoDAPL protests. "U tube [sic] crowd control. Have a great day!" Schweitzer wrote to the police officers. In the email, sent prior to the major police attacks and raids that would later make national headline news, he suggested the cops policing pipeline protest invest in "skunk spray"—an Israeli chemical weapon invented to degrade and humiliate Palestinians by dousing them in a nauseating, putrid biomedical odor that takes days to remove. "Forget the wall," he wrote. "Just put sprayers all along the southern border with sensors. Might have saved lots of store fronts in Baltimore and Ferguson. The US needs to get some of this for the looters in any out of control demonstrations. Israelis crowd control method. NOW WE ARE TALKING. BRILLIANT. Skunk spray!"<sup>3</sup> Such comments add insult to injury for Palestinians defending their homes against demolition or protesting the killing of loved ones.

In other emails, officers shared a Federal Emergency Management Agency "Field Force Operations" manual, which guided police officers in correct "crowd control" methods, "pain compliance" techniques, and application of "riot control agents," including chemical weapons and projectiles such as rubber bullets and beanbag rounds. These "non-lethal"

weapons were deployed against unarmed protestors with ritualistic brutality, taking two individuals' eyesight and one woman's arm, while wounding and traumatizing countless others. The connections were clear: local law enforcement and private security imagined themselves participating in a global counterinsurgency against civilian populations that extended from Palestine to Baltimore, Ferguson, the US–Mexico border, and now Standing Rock. The war was against Black life, Palestinian life, migrant life, and Native life.

The tactics employed by TigerSwan, the murky mercenary security contractor hired by DAPL, were also confirmation that this was a global war. The security company had cut its teeth in the United States' never-ending "war on terror," in which it was deployed to run counterinsurgency operations against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. TigerSwan now applied the same techniques to Water Protectors. The *Intercept* reports that security personnel frequently referred to Water Protectors as "terrorists," planned prayer actions as "attacks," and the camps as a "battlefield." They also tracked the presence of Water Protectors of Middle Eastern descent, noting specifically the presence of Palestinians in the camps. TigerSwan went so far as to describe the Indigenous uprising as a "jihadist insurgency." When TigerSwan briefed local law enforcement on the camp activities, they frequently referenced aerial photography, which they used to monitor the growth and movement of the camps. In one situation report, an image of a gorilla is superimposed atop the camp. This was Harambe, the gorilla killed at the Cincinnati Zoo when a Black child fell into his cage. On one hand, white supremacists have used the killing of Harambe to mock Black people online, charging that the gorilla had to be killed because the Black parents are careless. On the other, the comparison of Black people to monkeys and gorillas is a well-established racist trope. Now, TigerSwan was evoking this anti-Black history to racialize, mock, and degrade Water Protectors with tropes of

primitivism. To DAPL and law enforcement, the camps were a place of death, a place to be destroyed, a place that threatened to expose the illegitimacy of settlement.

In the orientation pamphlet for new camp arrivals at the #NoDAPL camp was a hand-drawn map of the site. Roads had been named for Indigenous revolutionary heroes, such as Red Cloud and the Red Warrior Society. Indigenous nations had set up their own camps on site, and their locations were also shown. The map indicated where to find camp security, who were tasked, in part, with keeping out drugs and alcohol; it also showed where to get food, medical care, and camp supplies. This reflected the values of the new community: that Indigenous peoples not merely survive, but thrive. #NoDAPL offered a brief vision of what a future premised on Indigenous justice would look like. For all its faults, there is something to be learned from the treaty camps at the confluence of the Missouri and Cannonball Rivers. Free food, free education, free health care, free legal aid, a strong sense of community, safety, and security were guaranteed to all. Most reservations in the United States don't have access to these services, nor do most poor people. Yet, in the absence of empire, people came together to help each other, to care for one another. The #NoDAPL camps were designed according to need, not profit. (There were no prisons or armed bodies of the state.) That's what separated them from the world of cops, settlers, and oil companies that surrounded them. Capitalism is not merely an economic system, but also a social system. And it was here abundantly evident that Indigenous social systems offered a radically different way of relating to other people and the world.

Drawing from the Black radical tradition, Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the creation of this kind of world a form of "abolition geography" that "starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Indigenous freedom was, and is, a place; and for a moment, it took shape in the form of

the #NoDAPL camps. The #NoDAPL camps didn't just imagine a future without settler colonialism and the oppressive institution of the state, but created that future in the here and now. They were a resurgent geography that reconnected Indigenous peoples with the land. Unlike the cynical and exclusive world of the settler, who had removed, confined, erased, and dispossessed Indigenous peoples from place, this place capaciously welcomed the excluded, while also centering the core of an Indigenous lifeworld—relationality. At its center was the resurgence and reunification of the Oceti Sakowin. Much like the First Palestinian Intifada, anti-colonial resistance began by de-linking the community from the settler state. From 1987 to 1993, Palestinians built alternative economies, popular education models, healthcare services, and women's committees. Palestinian women also used the revolution underway to challenge heteropatriarchy, which was as anathema to Palestinian liberation from Israeli occupation.<sup>5</sup> During the #NoDAPL camps, women, LGBTQ, and Two-Spirit activists challenged settler colonialism, and did so according to their own customs, calling on cis Indigenous men to recognize that heteropatriarchy was just as untenable as the US occupation, or as the destruction of land and water.

Beyond the Dakota Access Pipeline, a growing international movement is fighting the expanding network of pipelines across North America. The Kinder Morgan, Keystone XL, Enbridge Line 9, Bayou Bridge, and TransCanada Energy East, among a whole host of others, connect Indigenous nations and frontline communities. The appearance of each new flashpoint of struggle indicates a growing anti-colonial resistance, led by Indigenous peoples against settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. New pipelines are creeping across the continent like a spiderweb, with frightening speed, but in the process, they are also connecting and inciting to action disparate communities of the exploited and dispossessed. Each pipeline exists in relation to other pipelines, and

while DAPL technically only extends from North Dakota to Illinois, it is fundamentally a transnational project, interlinking with other pipelines and infrastructure to ship oil to a global market, crossing the boundaries of settler states and trespassing through Indigenous territory.<sup>6</sup>

A vast array of solidarity networks supported the #NoDAPL struggle. Black Lives Matter, Palestinian justice organizations, religious groups, military veterans, and many more from other social locations and movements galvanized support for the Indigenous-led resistance from far beyond the physical geography of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. #NoDAPL was reminiscent of other allied struggles that have enriched the Indigenous struggles in the past, including the International Indian Treaty Council and Indigenous internationalist movements of the twentieth century. Countering settler colonialism's own physical infrastructure—trade routes, railroads, dams, and oil pipelines—is the infrastructure of Indigenous resistance, its ideas and practices of solidarity. The resistance camps may have been temporary, but the struggle for Native liberation continues, and the fort is falling.

Given that the western frontier of US expansion closed in 1890 (the nineteenth-century Indian Wars fought and won), Indian citizenship was imposed in 1924, a formal apology was issued in 2010, the tribal "Self-Determination Era" was inaugurated by Nixon in 1970, past wrongs were "settled" under the recent *Cobell* lawsuit, and "nation-to-nation" rhetoric and policies increased under Obama (along with the placement of Indigenous leaders in key roles within his administration), why was there the need to create a new movement?

One way of answering this question is to look to the movement marching under the banner of "Black Lives Matter." Why did it arise under the Obama administration? Anti-Black police violence didn't profoundly increase under Obama's presidency, but it did not dramatically decrease either.

Nevertheless, Obama's presidency brought into sharp focus the limits of racial inclusion under the rule of liberalism and capitalism. Consider the 2015 police murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore. Freddie Gray was killed by Black police officers, and neither a Black district attorney, a Black mayor, nor a Black president could save his life. No matter who's in charge, as Keenga-Yamahtta Taylor points out, the current political system cannot save Black lives.<sup>7</sup> The same could be said for Indigenous peoples and the warming planet. Obama's 2010 "new energy security plan"—greatly enhanced under Trump in 2017—incentivized and dramatically increased domestic oil and gas production, opening up previously protected federal lands managed by the Department of the Interior. Under capitalism, neither Democrat nor Republican can save Indigenous lands or Black and Indigenous lives. The continuation of state-sanctioned racial terror against Black and Native people, from police violence to energy development, from one administration to the next demonstrates only radical change in the form of decolonization, the repatriation of stolen lands and stolen lives, can undo centuries of settler colonialism.

The continuing legacy of the Pick-Sloan dams also thwarts the possibility of a liveable future for the Oceti Sakowin and the millions of people who depend the Missouri River for life. The dams personify settler colonialism—their concrete and rolled earth endowed with the will to disrupt, flood, dispossess, remove, and ultimately eliminate Native society. The Dakota Access Pipeline echoed this process. The full force of the settler state—politicians, police, private security, banks, and private companies—carried out the will of Energy Transfer Partners, the corporation building the \$3.7 billion pipeline that would tunnel under the Missouri River twice, the Mississippi River once, and cross four states (South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois). Today, their tools are more sophisticated: assault rifles, arrest warrants, rural county jails,

felonies, misdemeanors, body armor, armed drones, tear gas, mace, armored Humvees, the National Guard and state patrol, Black Hawk helicopters, Caterpillar earthmovers, and media censorship. But the Water Protectors draw from the history of past Water Protectors who fought to protect the same relative, Mni Sose. While corporations take on legal personhood under current US law, Water Protectors personify water and enact kinship to the water, the river, enforcing a legal order of their own. If the water, a relative, is not protected, then the river is not free, and neither are its people.

Mni Wiconi, as much as it reaches into the past, is a future-oriented project. It forces some to confront their own unbelonging to the land and the river. How can settler society, which possesses no fundamental ethical relationship to the land or its original people, imagine a future premised on justice? There is no simple answer. But whatever the answer may be, Indigenous peoples must lead the way. Our history and long traditions of Indigenous resistance provide possibilities for futures premised on justice. After all, Indigenous resistance is animated by our ancestors' refusal to be forgotten, and it is our resolute refusal to forget our ancestors and our history that animates our visions for liberation. Indigenous revolutionaries are the ancestors from the before and before and the already forthcoming.

Perhaps the answers lie within the kinship relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous and the lands we both inhabit. There is a capaciousness to Indigenous kinship that goes beyond the human and that fundamentally differs from the heteronuclear family or biological family. "Making kin is to make people into familiars in order to relate," writes Dakota scholar Kim TallBear. "This seems fundamentally different from negotiating relations between those who are seen as different—between 'sovereigns' or 'nations'—especially when one of those nations is a militarized and white supremacist empire."<sup>8</sup>

The Water protectors also ask us: What does water want from us? What does the earth want from us? Mni Wiconi—water is life—exists outside the logic of capitalism. Whereas past revolutionary struggles have strived for the emancipation of labor from capital, we are challenged not just to imagine, but to demand the emancipation of earth from capital. For the earth to live, capitalism must die.

Hecetu welo!

