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# Medicines at Standing Rock: Stories of Native Healing through Survivance

Selma Hedlund

In 2016, a historically large gathering of Indigenous peoples, tribal nations, and allies took place at the Standing Rock reservation, North Dakota, in response to the proposed construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Asserting *Mni Wičoni* (Water Is Life), a social movement emerged with the purpose of protecting clean drinking water and Indigenous lands. While water is often described as a first medicine by Indigenous peoples, the water protectors' stories explored in this essay suggest that the movement itself represented another remedy as well. Standing with Standing Rock became a pivotal moment of cultural revitalization, community and catharsis across Indian country. Drawing on Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) emphasis on storytelling and active presence as settler resistance, this study argues that the collective action of Indigenous water protectors, including their stories and remembrance of Standing Rock that denounce othering and challenge the colonizer's gaze, reflect Vizenor's concept of survivance. As an Indigenous state that goes beyond mere survival or existence, survivance signifies a *presence* communicated through the vitality of Native stories and remembrance.<sup>1</sup> This study of twelve in-depth interviews specifically focuses on the ways individuals engaged in large-scale, grassroots decolonizing praxis rooted in spirituality and ceremony—and were able to suspend their long battles against what Vizenor describes as genocidal traps of victimry, as this article will discuss.<sup>2</sup>

More than forty years before Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) received approval for the construction of DAPL, Standing Rock Sioux (Lakota) intellectual Vine Deloria, Jr. articulated the importance of the US government recognizing the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. In *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*, he writes, "The responsibility of any nation, and the particular responsibility of elected officials, is not to justify what has passed for legality but to anticipate

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the conditions and problems of tomorrow and attempt to deal with them.”<sup>3</sup> In 2016, however, it was made painfully clear that the US government had little interest in pursuing such a path when the DAPL was projected to span from the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota to southern Illinois, running underneath the Missouri and Mississippi rivers and Lake Oahe, close to the Standing Rock reservation. The pipeline would risk contaminating local drinking water, encroach on sovereign lands, and threaten ancient burial grounds, alarming citizens of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Earlier that same year, LaDonna Brave Bull Allard founded the *Oceti Sakowin*/Sacred Stone camp as a spiritual and cultural forum of resistance to DAPL. Within months, the camp grew into a village with thousands of water protectors representing more than 360 Indigenous nations. The preferred term “water protector” emerged as distinct from terms such as “activist” or “protestor,” signifying a stewardship of and symbiosis with the lands that have been under the protection of Indigenous peoples for generations.

The movement—and importantly, the violent maltreatment of water protectors—drew global media attention and solidarity. On December 4, 2016, under the Obama administration, the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) decided not to grant the permit of the proposed Keystone Pipeline, demanding an environmental assessment. The victory was short-lived. In January 2017, the Trump administration signed a presidential memorandum allowing ETP to resume construction with increased efficiency, expediting the environmental impact assessment initiated by the previous administration, and neglecting dialogue or public commentary.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the water protectors were violently evicted from the grounds and the camp was destroyed.

DAPL was placed in the ground and crude oil started running for commercial service between Bakken/Three Forks, SD, and Patoka, IL, in June 2017. After six months in operation, the pipeline had leaked five times, twice in North Dakota and once in South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, ETP announced plans to double DAPL’s capacity, but in 2020 these were interrupted by a federal judge who ordered USACE to conduct a full environmental review of the pipeline before approving its expansion. Another federal judgment later that year gave ETP thirty days to shut down DAPL and remove all oil from the ground.<sup>6</sup> This success for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and other plaintiffs was later overturned by the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, which did not find a pipeline shutdown was necessary while the results of the USACE environmental review were pending.<sup>7</sup> Although President Biden in the very beginning of his administration took significant steps to establish a commitment to the climate crisis and signed a memorandum for continued consultations with tribal nations, he chose to allow DAPL to operate without permits and without final review results.<sup>8</sup>

Pending the final fate of DAPL, this study concurs with a growing body of knowledge that highlights the subversive successes of the Stand with Standing Rock movement, contradicting non-Indigenous narratives that may reduce the outcome to the eviction of the camp and the construction of DAPL.<sup>9</sup> As Stand with Standing Rock takes its place in a long line of Indigenous political actions for decolonization, it defies Western interpretations of outcome and impact and its meanings are not contingent upon white approval. Randall Lake refers to this as the *consummatory* aspect of

Red Power rhetoric and Indigenous collective action, viewed as a demonstration of self-determination that aims to inspire resistance, sovereignty, and traditional revival among Indigenous peoples.<sup>10</sup>

In light of the police brutality, violent eviction, and interpersonal tensions and conflicts among water protectors and their allies, it would be inappropriate to describe the campsite as utopic or devoid of trauma. Yet the success of the movement is firmly asserted in a report by Reclaiming Native Truth (RNT), *Lessons Learned from Standing Rock*, where contributors identify four reasons why Stand with Standing Rock should be considered a triumph: the movement emerged organically as a creation of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's traditional teachings and cultural values; often spearheaded by Indigenous youth, it was built through grassroots efforts under the leadership of a tribal nation; in a powerful assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, through collective action it unified the largest number of tribal nations in modern history; and it harnessed the power of social and alternative media and gained celebrity support which compelled mainstream media coverage.<sup>11</sup> While the Stand with Standing Rock movement arose in response to a continuation of colonialization, the tools with which it was fought long predate European settlement—strengthened through alliances with others.

Indigenous stakeholders are outlining the subversive accomplishments of the movement in the face of continuous settler colonialism in a growing body of literature. Prominent among Indigenous scholarly testimonies, Gina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) outlines the relationship between ecocide and genocide and Indigenous peoples and environmental justice. She uses Standing Rock as a case study to explore what happens when Indigenous peoples are the central authors and directors of environmental justice.<sup>12</sup> Nick Estes (Kul Wicasa Oyate), a fellow water protector, outlines in his writings the long road of Indigenous collective action leading up to this historical event. Emphasizing how colonialism functions in tandem with capitalism, Estes demonstrates that Natives in their existence *and* resistance are physical barriers to implementing capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

This study examines how participating in the Stand with Standing Rock movement—as a large-scale, coalition-based Indigenous gathering and its rituals—may facilitate a healing process whereby water protectors with trauma can find healing and inspiration for continued self-determination. Although Indigenous recovery from intergenerational trauma should be understood in relation to community and kinship, this study highlights how the interpersonal has fundamental effects on the intrapersonal. While other authors have outlined the collective achievements of #NoDAPL, this interview series places the movement as the backdrop of individual identity projects, tracing how long-term resistance culminates in a sense of *presence*. Presence is here understood through Vizenor's concept of survivance, which influences both the theoretical and methodological framework of this study. As survivance disrupts the colonized-colonizer hierarchy and transcends the othering that the settler imposes, it allows us to move #NoDAPL beyond a mere antithesis to a colonial project. Rather, it can be framed as a moment of Indigenous vitality that did not only hold soothing properties for intergenerational trauma, but was also conducive to identity formation in which the settler's gaze is divested of power.

## DECOLONIZING PRAXIS AND SURVIVANCE IN INDIGENOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PRESENCE

In this literature review, survivance is treated as a manifestation of decolonization. I also examine empirical research that demonstrates how survivance encompasses cultural, linguistic, and psychological ways in which Indigenous peoples participate in processes of decolonization. In recent years, the word *decolonization* has gained wider traction as more organizations, groups and individuals seek to raise awareness about representation and challenge colonial traditions. However, as Unanga scholar Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang assert, decolonization in its true form can only refer to repatriation of Indigenous life, land and culture, which is distinct from non-Indigenous social justice projects or human rights rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> They argue decolonization is not a metaphor that can be reduced to subdued practices, friendly understandings, or toothless discourse wherein the settler seeks to evade responsibility and be reconciled with the Native. Tuck and Yang evoke Frantz Fanon, who described decolonization as an unsettling clash between two opposing forces that cannot be ignored, and the putting into practice the famous phrase “the last shall be first and the first last.”<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, decolonization is a disruptive and fundamentally transformative process that turns spectators and victims into actors and authors of their own language and new humanity. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori, Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou) agrees that while decolonization once denoted the official process in which a settler transfers governing powers to the colonized, it also describes a long-term process in which colonial influence is withdrawn from the bureaucracies, cultures, languages, and psychologies of colonized peoples.<sup>16</sup> Smith’s work on decolonizing methodologies and Indigenous knowledge productions demonstrate that in lieu of governmental decolonization and the return of territories, Indigenous peoples must begin their own processes of colonial divestment at the other end.

Implicit in decolonization is an urge for absolute freedom from the settler’s gaze, which continues to stereotype, marginalize, confine, and appropriate indigeneity.<sup>17</sup> From the time settler states first began to encroach on Native lands, Indigenous peoples have been forced to face the immense challenges of finding resilient and creative ways to keep their universes alive and how to recover from the continuously inflicted injuries of colonization. While repatriation of land is still delayed and displacement also endures, Vizenor’s deliberately abstract, yet powerful framework and practice is a guide to dodging misrepresentation, colonial erasure, and cultural death. Vizenor recognizes that simulations of the Indian as a defeated victim living in the ruins of their own destruction as a genocidal trap, a trap that seeks to take hold of Indigenous minds and bodies and make them complicit in their own undoing.<sup>18</sup> Rather than internalizing the dehumanized *victimry* that the settler imposes, Vizenor invites Indigenous individuals to simulate more than survival; by accessing toolboxes of Indigenous storytelling and cultural wealth and revitalizing them for contemporary cultural and political purposes, Indigenous individuals can become “Postindian warriors,” architects of survivance.<sup>19</sup> He articulates the concept of survivance to signify

an Indigenous state that goes beyond mere existence; survivance signifies a *presence* communicated through the vitality of Native stories and remembrance.

Vizenor's articulation of survivance can be seen as a powerful mechanism for the cultural, linguistic, and psychological aspects of decolonization that Smith describes. While he originally communicated survivance through writing, stories, and wit, the concept's definition is fluid enough to be applicable to Native cultural, political, and narrative vitality wherever it manifests. In one instance, Vizenor illustrates the active presence of survivance by describing how Luther Standing Bear willingly exposes himself to the settler other by enrolling in boarding school. Standing Bear makes a conscious choice to engage in a charade of imitating a white man, knowing that white men are merely playing Americans. Without succumbing to the imposition of victimry, he later returns to the reservation and continues to serve his people through education, culture, literature, and political activism, all of which would become survivance characteristics of Standing Bear's story and legacy.<sup>20</sup>

Using the example of Standing Bear, David J. Carlson discusses a possible interpretation of survivance as reasserting sovereignty through letting oneself be seen or recognized by others.<sup>21</sup> While admitting that "sovereignty" holds different meanings for the settler versus the Native, this complicates the hegemonic direction of the gaze and disrupts some of its power, revealing that to be seen can also be a demonstration of self-determination, and that the Indigenous gaze—as the original steward of the land—may also pierce the settler.

Yakama scholar Michelle M. Jacob describes cultural survivance as an essential part of decolonization and argues that taking part in Indigenous social movements, community building, and cultural practice are intrinsic parts of healing historical trauma.<sup>22</sup> In an ethnographic case study of her Yakama Nation, Jacob finds that Indigenous communities within their own heritage hold the solutions to the social problems they face. Making use of a powerful decolonizing praxis of cultural revitalization and grassroots activism, the Yakama are formulating their own approaches to social change, soothing of intergenerational trauma (or "soul wound," as Eduardo Duran describes it) and fostering healthy identities among their young.<sup>23</sup> Among others, Jacob builds her theory of a decolonizing praxis on Cherokee sociologist Eva Garrouette's critical framework on "radical indigenism," which firmly asserts that robust understandings of American Indian identity cannot be abstract, but need to be relevant to the sacred traditions of tribal nations as well as current issues that concern said communities.<sup>24</sup>

Like Vizenor, Garrouette is resisting submissive participation in complicated identity criteria imposed by the settler and the stereotyping of Indigenous peoples that US popular culture disseminates. Instead, she proposes Indigenous identity and knowledge building that is inherently spiritual and true to Native traditions. Like Garrouette, Jacob calls for activism that is radically faithful to Indigenous epistemologies and argues that no decolonizing theory is meaningful unless it resonates with Indigenous activists working on "the ground."<sup>25</sup> Jacob's cutting-edge research invites further connections to be made between identity, survivance, activism, and healing of Native trauma. A number of studies show that community-based treatment that incorporates cultural and spiritual practices is particularly useful for addressing

the deep-seated damage continually inflicted on Indigenous peoples by colonial processes.<sup>26</sup> The novelty of this research lies in examining how large-scale Indigenous grassroots activism across tribal nations creates a pan-Indian decolonizing praxis, fosters survivance, and creates a space wherein identity formation may be rooted in Native spirituality and ceremony.

## METHODS AND PROCEDURE

This article is a qualitative study of twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals who identify with the original peoples of what is currently called the United States.<sup>27</sup> Recruited by a combination of convenience sampling through previously established connections and snowball sampling, the participants all live in a Midwestern town about a ten-hour drive from the Standing Rock reservation. Nine of the twelve traveled to the Standing Rock camps and the other three supported the movement from their home towns in different ways, including attending rallies, donating money, and spreading awareness on social networks.

Interviews were analyzed through open coding followed by selective coding, from which crucial and often overlapping themes were identified. These themes structure the findings discussed. It is clear that an interview series of this size cannot presume generalizability. To that point, sociologist Mario L. Small addresses the issue of “biased” and “representative” samples and encourages qualitative researchers to refrain from using a terminology belonging to quantitative or positivist science. Instead of pursuing the lost cause of generalizability, he argues, we must find an alternative language and inquiry, such as reimagining a “small sample” as a “set” instead.<sup>28</sup> I therefore refrain from describing my number of participants as a “sample”; rather, they constitute a set of cases.

The participants are citizens of tribal nations: Lakota (Sicangu and Oglala), Ponca, Cheyenne, Omaha and Yankton. To protect their privacy, I do not make individual links between tribal nations and individual participants; it should be noted that even if some interviewees describe their Indigenous identity as citizen of their tribal nations mentioned, these identifications are redacted. Because the interviewees most commonly agree upon the terms “Native” and “Indigenous” when referring to themselves and their peers, these are the terms that I use.<sup>29</sup> While the terminology of this study is dictated by the preferences of its Indigenous participants to the largest extent possible, it is supplemented by Opsakwayak Cree citizen Gregory Younging’s guidelines and principles and the preferred terminology put forward by the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). In accordance with Younging, Indigenous identities and various terms associated with Indigenous peoples are capitalized, and the word “nation” is used over “tribe,” which often is ambiguous and problematic. NCAI affirms that “tribes” are nations, and opts for the term “tribal nation,” while also asserting that Native individuals are citizens as opposed to “members” of said nations.<sup>30</sup>

In centering attention on the act of water protection, this study identifies the remembrance and stories told of water protection as an act of survivance. Arguing that “Native imagination, experience, and remembrance are the real landscapes of liberty” and antithetical to erasure and silence,<sup>31</sup> Vizenor not only asserts that “you

can't understand the world without telling a story," but also that "there isn't any center to the world but story."<sup>32</sup> This is why the subject of this study is water protectors' narratives, perceptions, and making of meanings, rather than the observed events of the Stand with Standing Rock movement. The survivance of storytelling is joined with Garrouette's radical indigenism, which holds that Indigenous peoples possess philosophies of knowledge built on traditions other than Western positivist ones; they may stem from ceremony with land and language, and can include dreamscapes and spiritual communication with ancestors and non-human relatives.<sup>33</sup>

Upholding these epistemologies, the method of inquiry was designed in collaboration with Indigenous participants and knowledge bearers, following the premise of participatory action research that the inquiry must be relevant and appropriate for the participants if a non-Native scholar seeks to produce research with Indigenous individuals. The researcher shares ownership of the project with the participants and the community in which it is conducted. As this type of inquiry is tied to social justice, it entails responsiveness to the needs and opinions of stakeholders.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, before collecting data, I consulted prospective participants about the content of the interviews in order to determine its relevance.

## FINDINGS

The findings are divided into two subsections. The first builds on participants' narratives about how Native identities are shaped by complex interactions with resistance, marginalization, and trauma. By outlining the genocidal traps that the participants have had to navigate prior to joining the movement, this section contextualizes the transformational experiences described in section two. The second part examines the meanings that the participants assign to the Standing Rock movement as a galvanizer of Indigenous decolonization, healing, and survivance.

### *Refusing Victimry: Indigenous Identity Formations in Relation to Trauma*

As both the preexisting literature<sup>35</sup> and several participants in this study emphasize, the formulation of Indigenous identity is perilously related to colonial trappings, shifting the self into the other. Identifying with one (or more) out of a variety of racial, ethnic, national or even tribal nation citizenships associated with Indigeneity is nearly inescapably done in relation to past, present and ongoing colonialization, exclusion and discrimination.<sup>36</sup> This ambivalence of identification is overwhelmingly present in participant conversations. All participants' names are pseudonyms, noted by quotation marks on first use.

In an interview with one devoted activist, "Tony" carefully weighs and considers the different options for identification, but feels averse towards most, particularly anything that describes him as "American": "Any relation to being American, American Indian, Native American, American anything I don't necessarily prefer. The reason for that being, being a refugee or feeling like you are a refugee in your own land is one of those things that we have come to terms with and have come to accept as our reality." Born in Canada into a mixed-status family (Indigenous father and Puerto Rican



mother), Tony's sense of refugee status comes from historical trauma brought on by colonialization and growing up in citizenship limbo. Caught between governments, Tony has been deported from both the United States and Canada multiple times and, despite his tribal citizenship and long-standing ancestry on United States territory, remains unable to secure American citizenship.

He further explains that his reluctance to use hyphenated identities is "because it makes us feel subconsciously like we are separate. Because when people talk about Americans, what are they talking about? White people." Like Tony, all participants describe their identity in contrast to mainstream American society. "Bridget," for instance, who is also a mixed-race interviewee and an active participant in her local Native community, similarly deplors being referred to as "the first Americans," given that Native peoples were denied American citizenship until it was finally granted by passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. Being of mixed ethnicity makes belonging even more complex. As products of displacement, the participants navigate multiple cultural and ethnic spaces to gain recognition. Proving one's lineage or blood quantum is the most common path to enrollment for tribal nations in the United States. While these systems can be considered protective, their exclusionary functions (formal or social) are palpable for mixed individuals.

A local Native center employee, "Blechawin," has a lot of experience with the in-between spaces where many Natives find themselves trapped. "You have a lot of people that are sort of outcasts, that don't fit . . . and then you have some Natives that are full-blooded, but they are from a number of tribes with not enough blood for any of them." In spite of the contemporary global discourse of Indigenous self-determination, the imposed fracture of Native identities clearly emerges as a core component of trauma.<sup>37</sup> Although biracial people are often portrayed as exotic in the media,<sup>38</sup> research still suggests that mixed-race children and adolescents are more likely to experience higher levels of stress, health issues and other risk variables in comparison to their monoracial peers.<sup>39</sup>

Navigating the space in-between races and failing to gain full acceptance with any of them is shared by nearly all biracial participants, one of them a professor at a public university, who goes under the name "Abercrombie." Growing up half Irish-American and half Native, Abercrombie found himself demonized by both whites and Natives: "I was Mr. In-between, Mr. Man-Without-A-Country, Mr. Living-In-Two-Worlds." Because his father was abusive to his mother and abandoned the family, Abercrombie was more inclined towards his mother's Indigenous citizenship and heritage. Still, he describes his confusion around his ethnicity as "traumatizing." As an academic, he experiences an ongoing struggle with having his scholarly ambitions reduced to Native topics and issues. At the same time, Abercrombie describes the alienation from his heritage he and other Native scholars face in academia, a space so shaped by Western epistemology that it leaves them stuck in-between: "Most of us Native academics are fairly alienated from our tribes. Some of us go back to our reservations, most of us feel like we are imposters, traitors, living between two worlds, not being able to please either one, not being able to be a part of either one. . . . You are being asked to be a bad translator in some way."

When Abercrombie says “translator,” he is referring to the Lakota term *iyeska*. The concept *iyeska* signifies an interpreter between Natives and non-Natives, as well as one who has the ability to mediate between the human and the spirit world.<sup>40</sup> However, it has taken on a pejorative tone signifying “mixed blood” or “half breed.” Just as Abercrombie has memories of being subject to racial slurs by whites, he also has experienced the exclusion of his classmates at his Native college calling him *iyeska*, ultimately rendering him an outsider to both worlds. “Louis” is another biracial participant with a troubled childhood. Much like Abercrombie, Louis also describes himself as *iyeska*, growing up with a single German mother and a Native father who was incarcerated. Echoing Tony’s terminology of hyphenated identities and separation, Louis describes himself as a “separated American,” constantly put at a disadvantage for carrying his father’s Native last name. When Louis was eighteen, his father was released from prison and they started to build a relationship. Twenty years later, Louis’s father passed away from alcohol-related disease. Despite his father’s absence for large parts of his life, Louis remembers him fondly and describes the trauma and injustice that his father endured with great pain and empathy.

“Fonda,” another interviewee of mixed ethnicity, likewise shares her experiences of a traumatic and difficult upbringing. She describes herself as a “healer,” a spiritual person who started having visions at four years old. Misunderstood by her foster parents and care providers, she was diagnosed with and medicated for a variety of mental illnesses. Fonda was born of a short-lived relationship between an already-married Black American pastor and a Native woman who suffered from addiction. Both are deceased. Because Fonda spent her childhood in a number of all-white foster homes, a third race complicated her identity formation: “I wasn’t Native enough for the Natives, I wasn’t white enough for the whites, I wasn’t black enough for the blacks, so I’m stuck there somewhere in [*sic*] my own.” Fonda eventually moved to Europe and got married, but later returned home to reconnect with her own tribal nation. Even though she had felt “called” to do work with that nation, she met substantial resistance in her workplace, which she understands to be a product of trauma. She later found mentorship at another Indigenous center with citizens of other tribal nations.

In lieu of parental guidance about Indigenous traditions and spiritualities, the process of seeking out mentorship and belonging is central for most participants. The genocidal disruption of Indigenous families through the Christian boarding school system for a century (i.e., five generations) made its mark on many of their stories. Although Indigenous existence and survival itself can be seen as embodied resistance, refusing victimry and finding survivance continues to be an ongoing intergenerational struggle. A participant who calls himself “Smiley” has worked hard to overcome the difficult odds under which he grew up, both individual and structural. Smiley describes the psychological process of submission and survival in American mainstream society in terms of learning how to live with an abuser:

It’s kind of like when you’ve been abused, so you shut down the abused part and you look at what is good. So, it’s like making excuses. Let’s say you have an abusive spouse but they pay the bills and buy you nice clothes, so you focus on that. So

with Fourth of July, my daughter loves the fireworks, so I focus on fireworks and how cool they look rather than it being the Independence Day of America.

As we know, Smiley's abuser analogy is far from being only a metaphor. Abercrombie shares a particularly painful memory from Catholic boarding school. He and his brother escaped from their violent institution, but when caught two miles outside town, they were promptly returned for more beatings. Echoing Smiley's description of assimilationist trauma, Abercrombie dryly adds, "we did get cornflakes on Sundays though."

If Abercrombie was able to acquire the tools to critique and deconstruct the boarding school brand of assimilation to create a scholarship of survivance, others may internalize it. During our interview, small business owner "Zen" tears up when she recalls her late grandmother's reluctance to teach her daughter or granddaughter any traditional cultural knowledge after boarding schools had successfully made it taboo. Likewise, because school had turned "Faith's" grandmother into a devout Christian, her family was discouraged from engaging with traditional ceremonies. This elder's assimilation ultimately turned out to be reversible, however, for in her eighties she began to participate in powwows and proudly reclaimed her name and language. When Zen and Faith first became reacquainted with ceremonies and Native-oriented activism, the historical disruption and deprivation of culture and tradition precipitated notable anxiety. For them, the longing and eagerness to learn and participate is accompanied by the insecurity of entering a highly ritualized realm that is both familiar and foreign.

Despite the relegation of boarding schools to the "past," forceful pressures to assimilate remain. The disruption of family structures and "reeducation" programs took a massive, genocidal toll on cultural survival: nearly all participants grew up without any integration or guidance in their Indigenous traditions and spiritualities. While reservations are spaces for cultural immersion and community, at the same time some can also be places plagued by poverty, addiction, and other social and economic difficulties.<sup>41</sup> "Jacob" grew up on a reservation and is now a local radio host. In our conversation he longingly shares many fond memories of his family and friends swimming in the river and the poignant sensation of *Mitakuye Oyasin*—that they are all related or connected. Simultaneously, he recognizes how the combination of trauma and lack of opportunities facilitates addiction and finds it easier to stay sober while living off the reservation.

A majority of the participants have struggled with substance abuse and including Jacob, seven report they have chosen a life of sobriety. All of them link their sobriety to a greater ability to develop spirituality, as well as resilience and resistance to colonialization, stereotypes, and victimry. For example, Louis says that "drugs and alcohol block your spirituality" and Fonda describes how substance abuse led her astray from her ability to connect with her ancestors. However, drugs and alcohol are not necessarily the only substances that may impede healthy identity formation. According to Smiley, also at odds with Native survival and spirit is American consumerism, which he describes as a comfortable, yet artificial and poisonous, poppy field of fast food and TV that dulls the senses and seduces Natives into forgetting who they are and where they come from. For him, reclaiming an Indigenous identity means coming to terms with being an alien in the United States in that "everything around you contradicts your very existence."

Like Smiley, Blechawin is a strong advocate for Native emancipation and healing in her community. A staff member at a local Indigenous center with a system of health care funded by a tribal grant, she addresses multiple domains and finds that trauma is central to mental and physical health issues for Natives. Trauma may manifest as internal divide, horizontal violence and exclusion, addiction, poor diet, and other unhealthy life choices. She similarly describes her experiences of how many Natives struggle to reach an “aha moment”—that is, a realization or an awakening not only to historical trauma and cultural dispossession, but also the numbing, yet self-destructive effects that an unhealthy lifestyle can deceitfully offer. Although Blechawin grew up on a reservation, she reports that she did not “grow up traditional” and was in her twenties before she participated in her first sweat ceremony. Like Faith, she initially felt fearful and uncomfortable, but ready:

It’s probably the last twelve years that I have really started seeking out my culture, only because I felt safe to do so in myself. And a lot of times when I will enter a circle—people don’t know this about trauma, but you can see it, you can feel it, you can hear it. You can almost even taste it sometimes. And personally, I look at it as committing suicide. Slowly. And that everybody is kind of stuck in that rut of knowing like, “I know I need to change but I’ll just stay here because it’s comfortable, it’s comforting.”

Nearly all participants share Smiley and Blechawin’s experiences of eventual adult reconnection to their cultural heritage, traditions, and spirituality. Many struggled with excessive partying, run-ins with the law, and incarceration before they accessed these medicines and achievements of survivance. However, an active strategy of fulfilling racist stereotypes in order to intimidate an oppressive society must be distinguished from a “dulling of the senses.” While Tony, Smiley, Louis, and Bridget share experiences and behavioral responses to racism and racial stereotypes that may be termed self-destructive, their responses to this erasure and victimry are nonetheless acts of agency.

Growing up in a largely white town and often the only Native in the room, Bridget remembers how she enacted “the crazy Native” who drinks and fights. In his partying days, Smiley also would frequently get into fights with people who reminded him of abusers or bullies. Being “good at violence” earned him respect and a powerful reputation. Louis felt “racially singled out” and struggled with both bullies and teachers at his largely white school. His last name exposed him as Indigenous and his ethnicity was frequently mocked. Having grown up sometimes having nothing but popcorn to eat, Louis joined a group of other Native young men who felt marginalized and deprived. Louis describes his group of friends as a “little family,” who together, often through theft and other petty crimes, took what they could from a hostile world that had refused them every opportunity. Reflecting on this time in his life, Tony reluctantly describes himself then as a “legit thug. Like, I’d punch you in the face.” Like others, he eventually got arrested and sent to prison. Tony says:

So, we are alcoholics, we’re drug addicts, we’re X, Y and Z, we’re felons. . . . There are so many things that go into that and we buy into it. We’re street people, we’re gangsters, we are whatever negative connotation they want to put on us, we accept

that. We're savages. I remember people saying, "Indian people are savages" and I was like, "Imma show you savage." I'm making it worse myself, because I'm perpetuating already ignorant views on my people.

As already indicated, sobriety as self-care has also been facilitated by a reconnection with Indigenous spiritualities and cultures. Indeed, the majority of the participants found self-stereotyping and self-destructive resistance unsustainable, and felt compelled to find more nourishing forms of resilience to heal the soul wound. When asked about how they persevere in the face of hardship, Blechawin and Fonda specifically mention "self-care" as an essential retreat from pressures within and outside their communities. Taking part in traditional ceremonies and practices is a vital habit for both of them, and Blechawin emphasizes the importance of utilizing culture for therapeutic purposes with many of her Native clients.<sup>42</sup>

Standing Rock also comes to play a significant role in this process of survivance. As we will see, individual water protectors will come to report that participation in the movement alleviated some of the trauma and sense of displacement they may have previously experienced. The "medicine" of Stand with Standing Rock manifested itself on multiple levels, including the political, cultural, and spiritual.

### *A Collective Decolonizing Praxis: Survivance Stories of Standing Rock*

At the time of the interviews, the Standing Rock camps had been recently evicted. Still, the movement is very much alive in the minds of many participants. Many of them remember being in ceremony with deity, ancestors, culture, and land in the movement, enriching their ways of knowing themselves and their kin, their pasts, and their futures. Independent of each other, many of them use terms like "calling" to explain why they felt compelled to join the movement. One of them is local political activist "Mickey," who describes reading that a tribal chairman had gotten arrested at the camp like a "punch in the stomach." She immediately started raising funds to rent a cargo van, load it up with supplies and family members, and drive ten hours to the Standing Rock reservation. As Mickey remembers, "You could just feel this calling of Mother Nature, calling for help. A distress signal."

Similar to Mickey, Blechawin recalls that "When I heard the call to action, every fiber of my being told me I had to be there." She packed her vehicle, brought her kids and friends, and made the drive. After this visit, she decided to take two weeks off from work and return. Eventually, Blechawin drove back and forth between her home and the camp six or seven times. She compares the feeling of being there to a return to her people's origin in the Black Hills. Throughout her life, Blechawin has experienced a "pull" that she attributes to her spirit that dwells in the Black Hills, waiting to be awakened. She made frequent visits home to the reservation, but the inner unrest never dissipated. When she went to the Sacred Stone camps, Blechawin understood it as Mother Earth summoning all her Native peoples together and she describes how, for the first time, her inner restlessness disappeared.

Bridget too experienced the campsite as a place of belonging—a home. Bridget never considered herself an activist, but as she watched the campsite grow through social

media, she all of a sudden felt that “something inside me told me that I needed to be there. I needed to go, I needed to realize that all these things that my ancestors have done to get me where I am today can’t just stop with me, it needs to continue. They didn’t do all that in vain.” The daughter of a Native mother and a father of Black and mixed ethnicity, Bridget grew up in the suburbs of a largely white town. She often felt that it was easier to blend in with mainstream society and harder to gain acceptance in Native or Black American cultures because she had to “prove herself more.” Where she currently resides, Bridget has now established firm connections with the Native community, both at the college where she works and civil society. In describing her experiences visiting the camp, she remembers driving over many hills until she first laid eyes on *Oceti Sakowin* in the valley below. Tearing up, the tone of Bridget’s voice changes:

It felt familiar, like I had been there before, like I had had memories of it from before, in my DNA. It was just . . . it was overwhelming. I haven’t talked about it like this in a while, but when I do, I always cry because it was powerful. It was like going home. And for me to not know where home ever was. It was amazing. Just to see that this is what it used to be. To be in a place where there are more Natives than anything else. Not feel like a minority. It was just really powerful. To see all these Natives coming together.

Although most participants felt inspired by others to join, they too describe a personal urge that came from within. Zen cannot help but cry when she remembers the many weeks she spent driving back and forth between her home and the camp, forsaking her business and romantic relationship for the cause. She describes the calling to go to Standing Rock as something inside her; a connection, an internal instinct: “It was like being kidnapped,” she says. The sensation of arriving and setting foot on the campsite was an experience of transcendence that exemplifies a decolonizing praxis with healing properties. Participants depict it as vibrantly spiritual, a place of light and vibrations where you could feel the presence of ancestors and find relief from trauma and exclusion.

Fonda shares that “Going up to Standing Rock and being a witness to the love and the healing that was there, it was so loud; you could feel the earth vibrating underneath you. I was just shown all the things I had been seeking my whole life, I was accepted. There was leadership, mentorship, and there was no going back from that.” Faith describes the “overwhelming spirituality,” amazed at the sight of so many Natives coming together, being exposed to so many Native cultures new to her. Like Fonda, Zen, and many others, she testifies that “you felt something as soon as you got there. The way everyone embraced each other and came together, it was just beautiful.” Mickey similarly describes the camp as “Wakonda’s [God’s] land” and Fonda, Blechawin and Zen all express how the grip of trauma miraculously loosened or temporarily lifted in this space and time. Blechawin’s arrival story is similar to “Bridget’s,” both amazed at the vibrant atmosphere and togetherness of *Oceti Sakowin*: “over each hill, we could just feel this energy,” Blechawin describes. “And suddenly, we went over one and there it is. We could see this light. Like, wow. And for all its splendor, just the energy that was there.” She was baffled by the openness and hospitality of the camp, a kindness

between strangers she had never seen among Natives before. “Here in my community, I can’t even get that walking down the street because of all the trauma.”

As a young woman, Fonda had been arrested multiple times and being Black, Native, and female, sees herself as an easy target for law enforcement. She says she has always had a heightened anxiety around police. At Standing Rock, however, Fonda describes feeling empowered and untouchable, able to look at the officers on the front lines straight in the eye:

Down on the frontlines, there was this divide. There was the police side, the military side and the civilian, Native, ally side . . . and I’m telling you, there was this force field around our side and once you’ve entered in, you are in ceremony. . . . I don’t know how to describe it other than being in an energy or force field that was safe. None of my preexisting trauma affected me in that moment . . . I felt like I was backed by a thousand relatives and that our message was stronger than any weapon. Our prayers were louder than any of their negativity that they were trying to instill in us. None of their scare tactics worked, we were a deflection of light.

Fonda is describing the suspension of trauma and fear—a complete renunciation of victimry that is the result of collective action and spirituality. Fonda’s gaze pierced through the settler (i.e., the police and military) with no trepidation, a Postindian warrior of survivance standing alongside others. One can draw a parallel to Standing Bear, who in Vizenor’s study asserted his survivance by allowing his presence to be known by colonizers without succumbing to their gaze.

Zen, too, was surprised by her own outspokenness in relation to the movement. Of mixed race, she has often been uncomfortable with taking initiative in many Native settings in her home town. Still, with a daughter eager to organize for the cause, Zen found herself taking on a role that initially felt intimidating. In a departure from some of her insecurities, at Standing Rock Zen experienced both an individual and collective emancipation that temporarily erased the pains from her past and present: “Together, we are strong, just like we were in North Dakota. And that meant everything to me. I didn’t want to come home. It was a completely different world. I didn’t suffer; I had no sufferings.” Having had a taste of this respite, Zen grew more impatient with both the lifelong injustices done to her and to Indigenous peoples historically. The movement allowed her to assume leadership as well as to deconstruct collective and personal trauma in a new way.

The subject of racial slurs, much like Zen, Louis has been called “every name in the book.” Visiting Standing Rock in his experience instilled a lingering sense of revolt and resistance. Smiley had invited Louis, whom he had met during his incarceration, to join a run to Standing Rock. In prison, Smiley had encouraged Louis to participate in sweat lodge ceremonies and they formed a strong friendship based on overcoming adversity, maintaining sobriety, and embracing Native spirituality and culture. Going to Standing Rock would become a pivotal moment for both. Louis remembers:

The moment I stepped onto that ground, a complete chill went through my whole body. I felt the presence of our ancestors there, so many tribes collaborating together, seeing all those flags, seeing all the tipis popped up . . . I was not the only

one that felt it. That was something that was so powerful, I had never felt anything like it in my entire life and just to be a part of that was one of the most amazing experiences I have ever felt in my life.

Emulating a Native collective memory,<sup>43</sup> he describes as if he had been there how visiting the camp “took him back” to the battle for Wounded Knee, Custer, as well as Red Power and AIM in the sixties. “We got a feeling of togetherness,” Louis says, “to actually stand for something of this importance. And I think more of that needs to happen. We need to stand up against our government.” Louis would leave Standing Rock feeling more resolved in his Native affiliation and political convictions.

Smiley would make frequent runs to the campground. When he first arrived, he was excited about the coming together of so many Natives, but also apprehensive about the potential for police brutality. His anxiety was soothed on being invited to sing at a sweat lodge ceremony, which prompted him to reconnect with his spirituality. Joining the Standing Rock movement was also the beginning of active engagement in local Native rights advocacy for Smiley, as well as his involvement in international conversations with other social justice organizations. Bridget would also travel abroad in order to spread awareness about the movement and the struggles that it represents. She organized open events in her hometown with Blechawin, Fonda, and Faith, trying to keep the spirit of Standing Rock alive and raise money for clean water access across America. Fonda asserts that “water is our first medicine” and the struggle for it must continue.

Many participants expressed a commitment to the movement following the camp eviction and continue forms of resistance using available channels. For many, the Standing Rock campsite was not just the grounds for a social movement; it was also an arena for Native cultural practice, spiritual exchange, and relation building. Although conflict with both Natives and non-Natives is considerably influential in many of the participants’ lives, solidarity, unity, and intertribal connections remain at the forefront of their experiences at the campsite. Fonda describes it as an awakening of a “sleeping giant” and Blechawin remembers, bumping into people she knew at the site, how her social network grew and galvanized her. Her feeling was, “Wow, Indian country gets smaller and smaller with every handshake. I was glad we came.”

I emphasize, however, that participants are not without criticisms of the movement and its impacts. “Keya,” for instance, in addition to Tony and Abercrombie, is reluctant to describe the effects of the movement in purely positive or healing terms. Keya is an elder who has worked hard all her life to maintain her specific cultural practices and language. As such, she is not attracted to a future decolonizing praxis where distinctions between tribal nations become further blurred. While she appreciates that the Standing Rock movement contributed to the overcoming of differences and internal hierarchies between tribal nations, she fears the distortion of tribal distinction and dilution of ceremonial rigor that can emerge from developments that prioritize political strategy over preserving each nation’s spiritual universe. Abercrombie has mixed feelings about “the whole coming together thing” as well. He admits that while strategic essentialism can serve a pragmatic, organizational purpose, it also includes an erasure of precolonial realities in which terms like “Indian,” “Native American,” and “Indigenous” did not exist.



<sup>44</sup> He reasons that joining forces under classifications like these inevitably entails “falling into essentialism, the language, discourse, label that they put on us all along.”

Tony expresses yet another concern about an Indigenous movement that indiscriminately invites too many non-Native people. One of the early organizers of rallies for Standing Rock in his hometown, he watched as meetings grew from ten people into large crowds. As a frequent visitor of the camp, Tony emphasizes that the space was far from being Native exclusive, as it was also occupied by non-Indigenous people and groups calling themselves allies, or, as Tony puts it, “hippies and hipsters and activists.” Like most other participants, he underscores that Native Peoples are not the only humans in need of clean water and that the struggle is shared by impoverished communities everywhere. However, Tony does not appreciate support from allies ignorant about Indigenous peoples or outsiders feeling entitled to struggles that are not theirs in that these people can choose to leave, whereas the resistance accompanies Tony and his peers wherever they go:

For us, everything we do is resistance. Just being us in and of itself is a struggle. . . . In order for us to see progress, we have to be the movement. We have to lead, we have to be in the back, we have to be everywhere in the movement. There is little room for allies. And I think they need to realize that.

Tony’s impatience with uninformed or entitled white activists colonizing Oceti Sakowin reveals how his hopes for the movement go beyond winning the battle against DAPL. Rather, he sees an opportunity for a decolonizing practice to take place. Although non-Native participants contributed to the impressive numbers at the Standing Rock camps and its corresponding solidarity movements around the country and world, Tony argues that resistance tourism prevents the campground and movement space from conducting decolonization.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Bridging the local and the global, the extraordinary gathering of tribal nations from around the globe emerges as an urgent social organization, raising questions about sovereignty, Indigenous self-determination, ecocide, colonialism, and capitalism. The impact of the Stand with Standing Rock movement, as it intersects with environmental justice, represents a transformative moment for Indigenous Peoples’ rights. Beyond its political accomplishments, participants found within the movement a unique space for cultural revival, spiritual catharsis, and decolonizing praxis. Previous studies have often demonstrated how local Indigenous activism and revitalization of one’s own tribal traditions can have healing properties. The stories upon which this research is built, however, further suggest that large-scale grassroots actions bringing together tribal nations in large enough numbers may actualize the unsettling power clashes as well as the transformative effects that come with decolonization, as Fanon describes the process.

While acknowledging the weight of Lake’s argument that Red Power rhetoric is not addressed to the settler, there is a significant point made by stepping *into* the gaze, backed by a powerful spiritual organization, and challenging the settler power to witness an Indigenous demonstration of self-determination that is devoid of victimry.

Clearly, #NoDAPL is only one of many anticolonial projects and the wisdom and knowledge with which Indigenous peoples forged resistance and upheld stewardship of the land are drawn from traditions much older than European settlement. The battle is fought and survivance manifested in this knowledge. In other words, manifestation of survivance is something more than the antithesis to colonialization. As Vizenor argues: “We can be prisoners, and we are, in our bodies. But we can liberate our minds. Tribal people were brilliant in understanding that a figure, a familiar figure in an imaginative story, could keep their minds free.”<sup>45</sup> By putting their memories and experiences of this freedom into words, participants further counter colonial narratives, sustaining the simulation of survivance. While decolonization as a term cannot be spelled without colonialization, survivance in actions and stories are pockets of that powerful imagination in which self-determination can be conjured and seized.

Not only did the movement facilitate self-representation and garner attention to Native realities, which are a far cry from genocidal commodities in Hollywood productions, mass-produced headdresses, and team mascots.<sup>46</sup> It also offered an opportunity for social networks to grow, conversations to take place, and individuals to become activists who assume new roles inside and outside their communities. Although Stand with Standing Rock was not conflict-free, the participants’ recollections and experiences at the camp are characterized largely by ceremony, mutual understandings, and collective strength. A wide variety of tribal nations could rally around the notion that “water is our first medicine,” yet a closer look at the movement reveals another medicine: the power of a collective, spiritual decolonizing praxis built up from the grassroots. This approach resulted in a formidable movement and had a significant impact on individual identity projects and recoveries. Still, as Jacob emphasizes, Indigenous healing is always relational; to heal the Indigenous self is to heal your ancestors’ soul wounds and protect future generations from intergenerational trauma.<sup>47</sup> While this study is a snapshot of impressions and remembrances, its findings warrant a continued, long-term analysis of how grassroots activism and cultural revitalization across tribal nations affects Native healing.

### Acknowledgments

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