

## Prologue:

# Prophets

Thanksgiving is the quintessential origin story a settler nation tells itself: “peace” was achieved between Natives and settlers at Plymouth, Massachusetts, where *Mayflower* pilgrims established a colony in 1620, over roast turkey and yams. To consummate the wanton slaughter of some 700 Pequots, in 1637 the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, William Bradford, proclaimed that Thanksgiving Day be celebrated “in honor of the bloody victory, thanking God that the battle had been won.” Peace on stolen land is borne of genocide.

It was Thanksgiving 2016. We had spent a bitterly cold night at a Wyoming gas station off I-80, among a half-dozen other cars loaded with camp supplies and Water Protectors. Everyone was up before sunrise, hoping the interstate would reopen after the overnight freeze. Among them were Natives and non-Natives from the Pacific Northwest and West Coast, sporting fatigues and signature black and tan Carhartt jackets with patches declaring: “WATER IS LIFE.” “This is Trump country—we gotta hit the road!” one of the Water Protectors exclaimed, half-jokingly, to the packed truck stop bathroom. Outside, white men glared at us from their dually pickups. Wyoming is an oil, gas, and coal state, and it was sending its police to fight the modern-day Indian war that we were on our way to help resist. We filed into our cars and took the on-ramp toward Standing Rock.

This was my fourth and final trip to Oceti Sakowin Camp, the largest of several camps that existed at the confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers, north of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, from April 2016 to February 2017. Initially, the camps had been established to block construction of Energy Transfer Partners’ \$3.8 billion Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a 1,712-mile oil pipeline that cut through unceded territory of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty and crossed under Mni Sose (the

Missouri River) immediately upstream from Standing Rock, threatening the reservation's water supply.

This was not just about Standing Rock water: The pipeline crossed upriver from the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation on the Missouri River, transporting oil extracted from that reservation's booming fracking industry. It cut under the Mississippi River at the Iowa–Illinois border, where a coalition of Indigenous peoples and white farmers, ranchers, and environmentalists in Iowa opposed it. And it crossed four states—North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois. But it was Standing Rock and allied Indigenous nations, including Fort Berthold, who had put up the most intense resistance.

After North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrymple declared a state of emergency on August 19, 2016—to safeguard the pipeline's final construction—the movement surged. Dalrymple deployed the National Guard and invoked powers under the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) that are normally used only during natural disasters, such as floods, fires, and hurricanes. EMAC also allows for state, municipal, and federal law enforcement agencies to share equipment and personnel during what are declared “community disorders, insurgency, or enemy attack.” In April 2015, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan had also used EMAC powers to crush a Black-led uprising for justice for Freddie Gray, a Black man killed by Baltimore police. This time it was an Indigenous nation that was declared the threat.

The encampments were about more than stopping a pipeline. Scattered and separated during invasion, the long-awaited reunification of all seven nations of Dakota-, Nakota-, and Lakota-speaking peoples hadn't occurred in more than a hundred years, or at least seven generations. Oceti Sakowin, dubbed the “Great Sioux Nation” by settlers, once encompassed territory that spanned from the western shores of Lake Superior to the Bighorn Mountains. Only in stories had I heard about the Oceti Sakowin uniting, its fire lit, and the seven tipis or lodges—each representing a nation—arranged in the shape a buffalo horn. Historically, this reunification had happened in times of celebration, for annual sun dances, large multi-tribal trading fairs, and buffalo hunts. But the last time was also in a time of war—to resist invasion. Now, the gathering had become what the passengers of our car—Carolina, an Indigenous immigration lawyer, Dina, an Indigenous writer, and I—liked to call “Indian City”; at its peak, the camp was North Dakota's

tenth-largest city. Its population surpassed 10,000 people, possibly reaching as many as 15,000.

The camp was at a standstill when we arrived, and completely encircled by law enforcement employing hundreds of miles of concertina wire, road blocks, and twenty-four-hour aerial surveillance, in what resembled a military occupation. In an effort to sow division, TigerSwan, a private security contractor hired by DAPL to assist North Dakota law enforcement, infiltrated the camps and planted false reports on social media and local news comparing Water Protectors to jihadist insurgents. The #NoDAPL movement was “an ideologically driven insurgency with a strong religious component,” they claimed, in documents released by the *Intercept*.<sup>1</sup> The effects were devastating, and many of the planted stories continue to circulate as truth, the divisions cleaved still festering. And because of the violent police crackdown on protests, including the infamous October 27 raid on the 1851 Treaty Camp, a hiatus had been placed on high-risk direct actions like placing bodies before earthmovers.

So the next day—Black Friday—we went to the mall. In Bismarck, North Dakota, shoppers, mostly white, flooded the Kirkwood Mall, eager to cash in on holiday discounts. Our plan was to disrupt Black Friday shopping, in unison with other Black Friday actions, to keep the message of #NoDAPL in the news and the fire burning in people’s hearts and minds. Back at camp, I had run into a childhood friend, Michael, and his partner Emma, and we had packed into his car. Through traffic was entirely blocked on Highway 1806, the fastest route to reservation border towns Mandan and Bismarck, and military checkpoints choked off business to Prairie Knights Casino—a major employer in the reservation and source of revenue for Standing Rock—and hampered residents’ access to off-reservation jobs and groceries. What resembled an economic embargo and, in different circumstances, could be considered an act of war against a sovereign nation, added an extra half hour to forty-five minutes to our drive.

The mall was packed. Bismarck police, all of them white, guarded the entrances with AR-15 rifles. Once inside, our goal was to create a prayer circle in the mall’s large food court, without getting caught; this meant we would have to “blend in.” That’s hard enough for Natives in a sea of whites.

Our cover was blown. A white woman cried out: “They smell like campfire!” Shoppers stopped and looked. She pointed to a group of women—faces wind and sun-burnt, jackets and skirts unwashed—heading toward

the mall's restrooms. Two cops, their AR-15s slung over their shoulders, approached, and grabbed and twisted one of the women's arm. She was dark-skinned, and her black hair was neatly braided to her waist. I waited to hear her arm pop from dislocation or fracture, as the cop slammed her face-first on the thin carpet.

"I'm trying to go to the bathroom!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Soon all four of them were sitting on the ground with their hands zip-tied behind them, and then the cops dragged them away. The smell of fire, a central aspect of camp life—ceremony, planning, cooking, eating, sleeping, singing, storytelling, and keeping warm—had given them away. "Oceti" in "Oceti Sakowin," after all, means "council fire." In another time, they might have been accused of "smelling like an Indian" because fire is central to Lakota ceremonial life; but now, smoke also indicated that one had come from the #NoDAPL camps.

"What's your problem?" asked a white man, approaching the cops. With a leg sweep, he was also facedown, with a knee on his neck and knee on his spine.

"Quit resisting!" the officer shouted. They didn't bother to pick him up, instead dragging him belly-first across the ground.

"He smelled like campfire," shrugged the cop who had thrown him down.

Eventually, we formed a prayer circle—before cops began tackling, punching, and kicking us too. A man's crutches were taken from him, and he hobbled on one foot as another cop tackled him. White men from the crowd began holding Water Protectors for the police or throwing them into the police line.

"Go back to the reservation! Prairie niggers!" one of them screamed in our faces.

White children looking on also screamed, though they seemed more scared of the police than of the Water Protectors. A woman got caught between the police and our retreating line, and cops grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to the ground crying. Her partner stepped in and was kneed several times in the face. A woman began running as we made our way through the exit doors and was tackled on the pavement by a cop.

We had flinched each time they nabbed one of us from the crowd, expecting the now-familiar chemical shower of CS gas or pepper spray—

another odor that was mixed in with the smoke, and that, in a single attack, could dull a person's sense of smell for days, sometimes weeks. But the presence of white shoppers and their families—unwanted collateral damage—protected us from being shot or sprayed. Instead, the cops used their hands and feet. Thirty-three were arrested. After Michael, Emma, and I escaped, we rendezvoused at the car.

Michael turned to me, his hands shaking. “Now I know what it's like to be hunted.”

At camp, the smell of campfire brought us back to another world—an older world, an Indigenous world always thought to be on the brink of extinction, a place at once familiar to Native peoples and radically unfamiliar to settlers. In the twilight hours, Water Protectors told stories and shared the prophetic visions of a better world, not just in the past, but one currently in the making, as purple-grey smoke filled the spaces between tipis, tents, and lines of cars and trucks.

The camps had attracted Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from across North America. On my first day in camp, in August, I dug compost holes with my Ojibwe relative Josh—a cook from Bismarck—and built a cook shack at the camp's main kitchen with my Diné relative Brandon and a Palestinian network administrator, Emad, from Yankton, South Dakota—himself a refugee from the US-backed Israeli colonization of his homelands. My Palestinian comrade Samia once called our sacrosanct duty at camp an “intifada on the plains,” because she saw it as an uprising against the same occupier. The cook shack, pieced together with genuine solidarity and gnarly fallen trees, survived a brutal Northern Plains winter and helped feed thousands.

I also knew Michael, a white kid from my small hometown of Chamberlain, South Dakota, along the Missouri River. I grew up in a single-parent, single-income household, in a mobile home literally on the wrong side of the tracks. Michael's parents made ends meet by working at the Catholic-run Indian boarding school where my father and his siblings had their Lakota culture and language beaten from them. Along with other kids like us, both Native and white, the two of us bonded over skateboarding, punk rock, and left politics—everything we felt rebelled against the pervasive, and often violent, conservatism of our hometown.

Politicians and media attempted to play up divisions in the camps, depicting white Water Protectors as “hippies” who treated the movement

like “Burning Man.” Those elements existed, and some Native people played along. But such portrayals gloss over meaningful solidarities. For example, our national camp, Kul Wicasa, welcomed everyone. Our camp’s leader, my friend and Tahansi (cousin) Lewis Grassrope, helped create the Oceti Sakowin Horn, inviting not only Indigenous, but also non-Indigenous peoples to participate. (Our families had shared political commitments that went back generations. In the 1930s his great-grandfather Daniel Grassrope, a traditional headman, and my great-grandfather Ruben Estes, a translator, traveled together to Washington, DC, to encourage Congress to pass the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act.)<sup>2</sup> Lewis knew the importance of allies.

Two years earlier he and I had spent cold nights in poorly insulated tipis protesting our own nation. Of all the tribal councils, that of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe was the only to cast support for TransCanada, the company building the Keystone XL Pipeline. Our protest camp had little to no help from our own people, nor from the outside world. There were no television cameras or social media live streams, and there was no Mark Ruffalo. But now the world had come to #NoDAPL. A white woman named Maria, a local reporter and a friend from Chamberlain, embedded herself in the camp as a cook, feeding thousands. Abe, a white military veteran from Colorado, ran our camp security. In Chicago, my comrades Kofi from #BlackLivesMatter and Renae, a Nuu-chah-nulth revolutionary socialist, led solidarity delegations. And there were many more.

Political elites and corporate media have frequently depicted poor whites and poor Natives as irreconcilable enemies, without common ground competing for scarce resources in economically depressed rural areas. Yet, the defense of Native land, water, and treaties brought us together. Although not perfect, Oceti Sakowin camp was a home to many for months. And the bonds were long lasting, despite the horrific histories working against them.

Chamberlain is a white-dominated border town next to the Lower Brule and Crow Creek Indian reservations. The settlement began as Fort Kiowa, across the river, a notorious trade hub whose early history is depicted in the 2015 blockbuster film *The Revenant* with great historical accuracy, despite its tired trope of a white savior “playing Indian.” The film shows the nineteenth-century fur trade’s organized plunder of not only the river ecosystem, but entire nations of people, and its apocalyptic death-world of rape, genocide, poaching, trespass, theft, and smallpox. In the final scene, the main protagonist, Hugh Glass, a real historical figure, approaches Fort

Kiowa, where he sees Native women and children begging outside the gates and being bought and sold inside by drunk white traders. These river trade forts were the first “man camps”: large, usually temporary, encampments of men working in extractive industries, from the fur trade to oil and gas development, where rates of sexual and domestic violence, and murders and disappearances of Native women and girls are intensified. As Ihanktonwan elder and member of the Brave Heart Society Faith Spotted Eagle has pointed out, “history teaches us that during times of crisis violence escalates;”<sup>3</sup> indeed, the proliferation of violence against the land has been directly related to attacks on Indigenous women’s bodies.

This region—our homeland—is also part of He Sapa, the Black Hills, or *the heart of everything that is*. He Sapa is the beating heart of the Lakota cosmos, where we emerged from red earth, took our first breath, and gained our humanity as Oyate Luta: the “Red People,” or the “Red Nation.” During the last ice age, massive glaciers carved up the land. After the ice retreated, it left rolling hills and tunneling valleys that became buffalo roads, where herds that once blackened the plains traveled during seasonal migrations to and from water. The buffalo followed the stars, and the people followed the buffalo. To honor our relations, we called ourselves “Pte Oyate” (the Buffalo Nation), and “Wicahpi Oyate” (the Star Nation). In these ebbs and flows of migration, all roads led to Mni Sose, which translates to “roiling water,” for the once-astir and often-muddy river. Many Lakotayapi nouns, like “Mni Sose,” indicate not merely static, inanimate form, but also action. In this landscape, water is animated and has agency; it streams as liquid, forms clouds as gas, and even moves earth as solid ice—because it is alive and gives life. If He Sapa is the heart of the world, then Mni Sose is its aorta. This is a Lakota and Indigenous relationship to the physical world. What has been derided for centuries as “primitive superstition” has only recently been “discovered” by Western scientists and academics as “valid” knowledge. Nevertheless, knowledge alone has never ended imperialism.

The US military understood this vital connection to place and other-than-humans in the 1860s when it annihilated the remaining 10 to 15 million buffalos in less than two decades. A century later another branch of the military, the US Army Corps of Engineers, constructed five earthen rolled dams on the main stem of the Missouri River, turning life-giving waters into life-taking waters. A river that was once astir was now choked and plugged. After World War II, the United States also aimed to “get out of the

Indian business”: to terminate federal responsibilities to Indigenous peoples that had been guaranteed through treaties, to relocate Indigenous peoples off their reservations, and to sell off remaining lands and resources to private industry and white settlers. The Pick-Sloan Plan, a basin-wide multipurpose dam project—which aimed to provide postwar employment, hydroelectricity, flood control, and irrigation to white farming communities and far-off cities—worked in tandem with Indian termination and relocation. With the flooding of the fertile river bottomlands, people were forced off the reservation. Remaining lands were largely uninhabitable, making relocation the only option for many. Thirty percent of Missouri River reservation populations were removed; 90 percent of commercial timber was destroyed; thousands of acres of subsistence farms and gardens were flooded; and 75 percent of wildlife and plants indigenous to the river bottomlands disappeared.

Oglala visionary and prophet Nicholas Black Elk, himself a Catholic, compared the invasion of white Christians as akin to the biblical flood. But unlike the Genesis flood that receded after 150 days, Black Elk’s apocalyptic deluge had no end. It has worked continuously to eliminate Indigenous peoples and their other-than-human relatives from the land, thereby severing their relationship *with* the land. According to the vision Black Elk described to poet John Neihardt in 1931, white men came like an endless wall of floodwater, creating “a little island,” or a reservation, “where we were free to try to save our nation, but we couldn’t do it.” Constantly hounded as fugitives, escaping from one patch of dry land to the next, the people “were always leaving our lands and the flood devours the four-leggeds as they flee.” The four-leggeds were bears, elk, deer, buffalos, wolves, and so forth—some of whom are presently extinct in the lands of the Oceti Sakowin. The Department of the Interior is tasked with managing the diminished lands and territories of both wildlife and Indians, survivors of an ongoing holocaust. “All of our religion of the old times that the early Indians had was left behind them as they fled and the water covered the region,” Black Elk lamented. “Now, as I look ahead, we are nothing but prisoners of war.”<sup>4</sup> His “we” included the four-leggeds.

Over the last 200 years, the US military has waged relentless war on the Oceti Sakowin as much as it has on their kinship relations, such as Pte Oyate (the buffalo nation) and Mni Sose (the Missouri River). What happened at Standing Rock was the most recent iteration of an Indian War

that never ends. DAPL was originally meant to cross the Missouri River upstream from Bismarck, a city that is 90 percent white. But the Army Corps rerouted it to cross downstream, citing a shorter route, fewer water crossings, and reduced proximity to residential areas. Now, it crossed the river just upstream from an 84 percent Native residential area—a suggestion made not by Dakota Access, but by the Army Corps, which went so far as to guide companies funding the pipeline to create environmental justice studies that would find no “disproportionate risk to a racial minority.”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the Army Corps had been one of the main driving forces behind choking the Missouri River after World War II. In 1946, without authorization from Congress, the Army Corps modified the Garrison Dam project to protect the small majority-white town of Williston, North Dakota, from flooding. Nothing was done, however, to protect against the flooding of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. The 212-foot dam flooded 152,360 acres of reservation lands, dislocating 325 families (80 percent of the tribal membership) and destroying 94 percent of their agricultural lands.<sup>6</sup> In 1955, the Army Corps selected the Big Bend dam site on Lower Brule and Crow Creek reservation lands, without notifying either tribal council. Six different sites were considered, four of which would not have flooded the agency town of Lower Brule. The reservation site was chosen for hydraulic reasons but also because its location wouldn’t flood the upriver town of Pierre, the white-dominated state capital of South Dakota, or its neighboring town of Fort Pierre.<sup>7</sup> Big Bend Dam flooded and dislocated both reservation communities for the second time, forcing some families who had moved to higher ground to relocate yet again. The first flood took out the Crow Creek Agency (the combined headquarters of the Crow Creek and Lower Brule tribes). A quarter of Lower Brule’s population was removed during the first deluge, and half during the second.

My grandparents, Joyce and Andrew Estes—both Kul Wicasa from Lower Brule—fought the construction of the Pick-Sloan dams in the 1950s and 1960s. The dams flooded nearly all of my great-grandmother Cornelia Swalla’s allotment. My grandfather, a World War II veteran and, according to my father, Ben, a Lakota code talker, returned from the war to find his homelands and nation under threat from the very government he fought to defend. Our lands, and lives, were targeted not because they held precious resources or labor to be extracted. In fact, the opposite was true: our lands

and lives were targeted and held value because they could be wasted—submerged, destroyed. Grandpa Andrew, nicknamed “Brown” for his dark complexion, later gifted his mother Cornelia’s remaining allotted lands to the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe so that our nation could rebuild the inundated Lower Brule town site. In 1937, my great-grandfather Ruben Estes, Cornelia’s husband and the first tribal chairman, opposed the state of South Dakota’s attempt to build dams on the Missouri River without Lower Brule’s consent. The old ones called Ruben “Tongue” because, after butchering his cattle, he gave away all the meat to elders and the hungry, keeping only the tongues for himself. My ancestors were tribal historians, writers, intellectuals, and fierce Indigenous nationalists at a time when Indians weren’t supposed to be anything but drunk, stupid, or dead. They were also Water Protectors, treaty defenders, and humble people of the earth, and they fought for and took care of Mni Sose as best as they could.

In 1963, my grandfather Frank Estes, who was named after Franklin Delano Roosevelt in honor of the “Indian New Deal,” wrote and published the first book on Lower Brule, *Make Way for the Brules*.<sup>8</sup> His book was a study of Indigenous movement before and during the reservation period. It was a response to the forced removals caused by the Fort Randall and Big Bend Dams and a challenge to the confinement narrative that Native people should just stay “home” in prisoner of war camps, now called “reservations,” out of sight and out of mind. In 1971, my grandfather George Estes, with Richard Loder, cowrote *Kul-Wicasa-Oyate*—a more extensive history of Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, including the reconstitution of communities and families after surviving forced removal by the US military to our river reservation homeland in the nineteenth century, as well as the two forced relocations caused by the Pick-Sloan dams in the twentieth century.

My grandfather Andrew, who had an eighth-grade education, wrote in the preface of *Kul-Wicasa-Oyate* what would have been a fitting epigraph for this book about our nation’s history of the defense of our land, our water, and our people:

My people’s history has been lost or destroyed since the coming of the white man. My people, in many ways, have been lost and destroyed by the coming of the white man ... This book is not the whole story of my people nor is it all that is best in our heritage. Some of our traditions, our hopes and our roots, we will never write down for the world to see. What we will allow the world to see is, in good part, in these pages. Read them my brothers and you white man, you read them too. It is a history of a proud people: a people who believe in the land and themselves. My people were civilized

before the white came and we will be civilized and be here after the white man goes away, poisoned by his misuse of the land and eaten up by his own greed and diseases.<sup>9</sup>

In September 2016, at a #NoDAPL protest in Chicago organized by the Native community and groups such as #BlackLivesMatter, I told this family history in front of a crowd of thousands outside the Army Corps headquarters. That city's vibrant Native community was itself a result of federal relocation programs onto traditional Potawatomi territory, an Indigenous nation subjected to genocide and removed from its homelands in the place currently called "Chicago." My ancestors could never have imagined that thousands, perhaps millions, would one day rally to defend the river, our relative Mni Sose. Half a century ago, there were no mass protests against the dams that still wreak havoc on our river, a history I have spent the more than a decade speaking and writing about, with little interest from the outside world.

As we marched, a light rain fell.

"Tell me what the prophecy looks like!" we chanted.

"This is what the prophecy looks like!"

And it *was* prophecy. Prophecy told of Zuzeca Sapa, the Black Snake, extending itself across the land and imperiling all life, beginning with the water. From its heads, or many heads, it would spew death and destruction. Zuzeca Sapa is DAPL—and all oil pipelines trespassing through Indigenous territory. But while the Black Snake prophecy foreshadows doom, it also foreshadows historic resistance and resurgent Indigenous histories not seen for generations, if ever. To protect Unci Maka, Grandmother Earth, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples will have to unite to turn back the forces destroying the earth—capitalism and colonialism. But prophets and prophecies do not predict the future, nor are they mystical, ahistorical occurrences. They are simply diagnoses of the times in which we live, and visions of what must be done to get free. In the past, youth followed the guidance of Indigenous elders, the old ones. But in these prophetic times, it is the old ones who are following the leadership of the young, the youth leaders of the #NoDAPL movement—among them, Zaysha Grinnell, Bobbi Jean Three Legs, Jasilyn Charger, and Joseph White Eyes, among others, who brought the message of the Black Snake to the world through thousand-mile relay runs from April to July of 2016.

For the Oceti Sakowin, prophecies like the Black Snake are revolutionary theory, a way to help us think about our relationship to the

land, to other humans and other-than-humans, and to history and time. How does one relate to the past? Settler narratives use a linear conception of time to distance themselves from the horrific crimes committed against Indigenous peoples and the land. This includes celebrating bogus origin stories like Thanksgiving. But Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by our past and by our ancestors. There is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. Our history is the future. Concepts such as Mni Wiconi (water is life) may be new to some, but like the nation of people the concept belongs to, Mni Wiconi predates and continues to exist in spite of white supremacist empires like the United States.

The protestors called themselves Water Protectors because they weren't simply against a pipeline; they also stood for something greater: the continuation of life on a planet ravaged by capitalism. This reflected the Lakota and Dakota philosophy of Mitakuye Oyasin, meaning "all my relations" or "we are all related." Water Protectors led the movement in a disciplined way, by what Lakotas call Wocekiye, meaning "honoring relations." To the outside world this looks like "praying," the smoking of the Canupa, the sacred pipe, offering tobacco, ceremony, and song to human and other-than-human life. The late Lakota linguist and scholar Albert White Hat Sr. notes that Wocekiye was purposely mistranslated to "praying" by Christian missionaries to describe "bowing and kneeling to a supreme power, which is much different from the original meaning of acknowledging or meeting a relative." There was no equivalent to "praying" in the Lakota language, although the word has taken on that meaning because of Christian influence.<sup>10</sup>

For the Oceti Sakowin, Mni Sose, the Missouri River, is one such nonhuman relative who is alive, and who is also of the Mni Oyate, the Water Nation. Nothing owns her, and therefore she cannot be sold or alienated like a piece of property. (How do you sell a relative?) And protecting one's relatives is part of enacting kinship and being a good relative, or Wotakuye, including from the threat of contamination by pipeline leak—in other words, death. This would also spell death for the Oceti Sakowin and its nonhuman relations. In this way, the rallying cry of Mni Wiconi—"water is life"—is also an affirmation that water is alive. Hunkpapa historian Josephine Waggoner has suggested that the word mni

(water) is a combination of the words mi (meaning “I”) and ni (meaning “being”), indicating that it also contains life.<sup>11</sup>

Mni Wiconi and these Indigenous ways of relating to human and other-than-human life exist in opposition to capitalism, which transforms both humans and nonhumans into labor and commodities to be bought and sold. These ways of relating also exist in opposition to capitalism’s twin, settler colonialism, which calls for the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and their other-than-human kin. This is distinct from the romantic notion of Indigenous people and culture that is popular among non-Natives and has been aided by disciplines such as anthropology—a discipline that has robbed us of a viable future by trapping us in a past that never existed. In the last two centuries, armies of anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, hobbyists, and grave robbers have pillaged and looted Indigenous bodies, knowledges, and histories, in the same way that Indigenous lands and resources were pillaged and looted. Their distorted, misinterpreted Indigenous histories are both irrelevant and unfamiliar to actually existing Indigenous peoples, and they are deeply disempowering.

There exists no better example of Indigenous revolutionary theory, and its purposeful distortion, than the Ghost Dance. In popular history books, the Ghost Dance appears briefly, only to die at the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. The Ghost Dance, in the revolutionary sense, was about life, not death; it was about imagining and enacting an anticolonial Indigenous future free from the death world brought on by settler invasion. It originated with Paiute prophet and healer Wovoka. In his vision, the Great Spirit’s Red Son transforms the earth. This Red coming of the Messiah wipes away the colonial world, bringing back the animals, plants, and human and other-than-human ancestors destroyed by white men and, in turn, destroying the destroyers. Wovoka did not predict the future. Rather, he profoundly understood the times in which he lived, and his prophecy occurred in response to the hardships brought on by reservation life. Its message of a coming Indigenous future spread like wildfire up the Western Canadian coast, down to the Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico, and onto the Plains. The Ghost Dance unified Indigenous peoples behind a revolutionary movement—one that sought nothing less than the complete departure of the colonial reality. Its visions were powerful and remain so today. Indigenous dancing had itself been outlawed and was therefore a criminal act. Lakota and Dakota Ghost Dancers attempted to shut down the

reservation system by refusing to send children to boarding schools or to heed the orders of Indian agents. But the absence of the colonial system was not enough to bring about true freedom; rather, freedom could only find its genuine expression in actions that would create a new Indigenous world to replace the nightmarish present.

The beauty and power of the Ghost Dance moved Oglala prophet Nicholas Black Elk, who saw it as parallel to his own vision: that the people must unite to nourish back to health the tree of life, so that it can bloom once again. The dance brought Black Elk new visions of Wanikiya, the Lakota word for the Red Messiah that literally means “to make live.” In 1932, poet John Neihardt published a literary interpretation of Black Elk’s vision in *Black Elk Speaks*, an influential book that Standing Rock scholar Vine Deloria Jr. described as “a North American bible of all tribes.”<sup>12</sup> After the Seventh Cavalry Regiment massacred more than 300 Lakota Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee in 1890, the Ghost Dance and Black Elk’s vision were thought to be dead or dying, like Native people. Neihardt contributed to this notion by fabricating the most-quoted lines in *Black Elk Speaks*. “A people’s dream died there,” mourned Black Elk in this made-up version, seeing the carnage at Wounded Knee and his relatives’ bodies strewn across the bloody snow. “The nation’s hoop is broken and scattered.”<sup>13</sup> But Black Elk never believed that, and he knew that collective visions for liberation didn’t die at Wound Knee. “The tree that was to bloom just faded away,” he said reflecting on the massacre forty years later, “but the roots will stay alive, and we are here to make that tree bloom.”<sup>14</sup>

Roots are an apt metaphor to explain how the aspirations for freedom—the tree of life—had stayed alive. Ceremonies, dance, language, warrior and political societies, and spiritual knowledge were forced underground, each of them made illegal by the punitive Civilization Regulations and only fully “legalized” in 1978 with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. Like many, to protect himself and his family, Black Elk had converted to Catholicism, but he never lost faith in his vision. For him, liberation wasn’t a one-off event, a single action, or a moment. If history books do not altogether deny the Wounded Knee Massacre, sympathetic treatments tend to label the Ghost Dance as a “harmless” trend that would have faded into the past, like the Indians practicing it. But if it were *just* dancing that was the threat, then why did the United States deploy nearly half its army against starving, horseless, and unarmed people in order to crush it?

Indigenous resistance draws from a long history, projecting itself backward and forward in time. While traditional historians merely interpret the past, radical Indigenous historians and Indigenous knowledge-keepers aim to change the colonial present, and to imagine a decolonial future by reconnecting to Indigenous places and histories. For this to occur, those suppressed practices must make a crack in history.

Karl Marx explained the nature of revolutions through the figure of the mole, which burrows through history, making elaborate tunnels and preparing to surface again. The most dramatic moments come when the mole breaks the surface: revolution. But revolution is a mere moment within the longer movement of history. The mole is easily defeated on the surface by counterrevolutionary forces if she hasn't adequately prepared her subterranean spaces, which provide shelter and safety; even when pushed back underground, the mole doesn't stop her work. In song and ceremony, Lakotas revere the mole for her hard work collecting medicines from the roots underfoot. During his campaign against US military invasion, to protect himself Crazy Horse collected fresh dirt from mole mounds. Because he knew it to contain medicines, he washed his body with the dirt. Hidden from view to outsiders, this constant tunneling, plotting, planning, harvesting, remembering, and conspiring for freedom—the collective faith that another world is possible—is the most important aspect of revolutionary work. It is from everyday life that the collective confidence to change reality grows, giving rise to extraordinary events.

At Oceti Sakowin Camp, courage manifested through the combination of direct actions and the legal strategy to defeat DAPL in court, which the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe spearheaded. Direct actions drew media attention and thus amplified the messages of #NoDAPL and Mni Wiconi, putting pressure on the federal courts and institutions to weigh in on the issue of Standing Rock's sovereignty. Direct actions also had the immeasurable psychological effect of empowering the powerless to action, by encouraging everyday people to take control of their lives and to shrug off the self-doubt and genuine fear that accompanies centuries of violent occupation. It also formed in everyday camp life.

The camps also performed another critical function: caretaking, or providing nourishment, replenishment, comradeship, encouragement, warmth, songs, stories, and love. The ultimate goal for Dakotas, and therefore the Oceti Sakowin, “was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must

be a good relative,” wrote the Dakota scholar Ella Deloria.<sup>15</sup> This was the underground work of the mole and the foundation of any long-term struggle, though it often receives less attention than headline-grabbing spectacles of mass protest and frontline action. Yet, both are equally important and necessary. As Dakota scholar Kim TallBear argues, caretaking labor is often gendered, and is seen as the work of women. But the fact that many contemporary social movements—in particular #NoDAPL, Idle No More, and #BlackLivesMatter—were led by women, and Two-Spirit and LGBTQ people, is important.<sup>16</sup>

My friend and relative, Lakota Water Protector Marcella Gilbert, pointed out how these roles have been taken up by generations of Indigenous women. Marcella’s mother, Madonna Thunder Hawk, and her aunties, Phyllis Young and Mabel Anne Eagle Hunter, were all leaders and participants of the Red Power Movement during the 1960s and 1970s. They were all pivotal members of the American Indian Movement, helped found the International Indian Treaty Council at Standing Rock in 1974, and formed Women of All Red Nations that same year—movements I will describe later in this book. Their leadership continued at Oceti Sakowin Camp by seeing to it that the next generation carried on the tradition. Phyllis Young was a respected Standing Rock elder and former councilwoman. Madonna and Mabel Anne fell back into leadership roles in their own camps, teaching and mentoring young people. For Marcella, freedom was education. She was a product of the “We Will Remember” Survival School, founded in Rapid City, South Dakota, in 1974. Her mother, Madonna, helped to create the school, where students were taught treaty rights and Native culture and history. We Will Remember was one of many survival schools created to address rampant discrimination against Native students in public schools, and to undo the indoctrination of Christianity and US patriotism at government- and church-run boarding schools. For Marcella, the #NoDAPL camps continued the tradition, providing a radical grassroots education on Indigenous self-determination and political autonomy—what it’s like to live and be free—to thousands of young Native people.<sup>17</sup> In other words, moments like #NoDAPL are ones where the Indigenous movement reproduces itself and grows.

*Our History Is the Future* explores the movement to protect the Missouri River marching under the banner of Mni Wiconi. How did it emerge, and how does settler colonialism, a key element of US history, continue to

inform our present? #NoDAPL and Mni Wiconi are part of a longer history of Indigenous resistance against the trespass of settlers, dams, and pipelines across the Mni Sose, the Missouri River. The Oceti Sakowin—our relationship to Mni Sose, and our historic struggle for liberation—are fundamentally tied to our prior history of Indigenous nationhood and political authority. This book is less a story about objects, individuals, and ideas than it is a history of relationships—those between the Oceti Sakowin, Mni Sose, and the United States as an occupying power. By focusing on these relationships, we can see that Indigenous history is not a narrow subfield of US history—or of the history of capitalism or imperialism, for that matter. Rather, Indigenous peoples are central subjects of modern world history.

This is not simply an examination of the past. Like #NoDAPL and Mni Wiconi, what I call *traditions* of Indigenous resistance have far-reaching implications, extending beyond the world that is normally understood as “Indigenous.” A tradition is usually defined as a static or unchanging practice. This view often suggests that Indigenous culture or tradition doesn’t change over time—that Indigenous people are trapped in the past and thus have no future. But as colonialism changes throughout time, so too does resistance to it. By drawing upon earlier struggles and incorporating elements of them into their own experience, each generation continues to build dynamic and vital traditions of resistance. Such collective experiences build up over time and are grounded in specific Indigenous territories and nations.

For the Oceti Sakowin, the affirmation Mni Wiconi, “water is life,” relates to Wotakuye, or “being a good relative.” Indigenous resistance to the trespass of settlers, pipelines, and dams is part of being a good relative to the water, land, and animals, not to mention the human world. Contrast this with the actions of Energy Transfer Partners (the financial backers of DAPL)—and of capitalism, more broadly, which seeks above all else to extract profits from the land and all forms of life. This is not to suggest that Indigenous societies possess *the* solution to climate change (and in fact, many Indigenous nations actively participate in resource extraction and capitalist economies in order to strengthen their self-determination). But in its best moments, #NoDAPL showed us a future that becomes possible when everyday Native people take control of their own destinies and lands, while drawing upon their own traditions of resistance. I am interested in the

kind of tradition of Indigenous resistance that is a radical consciousness, both anti-capitalist and anti-colonial, and is deeply embedded in history and place—one that expresses the ultimate desire for freedom.

In this book, I move through seven episodes of Oceti Sakowin history and resistance. This history is by no means exhaustive, but I have chosen to focus on these particular cases to show how they inform our present moment, and to chart a historical road map for collective liberation.

[Chapter 1](#) tells the story of the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock and its origins in the battle against tar sands extraction and the Keystone XL Pipeline, whose defense of Lakota and Dakota lands are part of a tradition of resistance against US imperialism that began centuries ago. I turn to the beginning of that history in [chapter 2](#), which describes the Oceti Sakowin's emergence as a nation and its first encounters, in the nineteenth century, with the United States as a predator nation.

Before long, those encounters evolved into the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century—the subject of [chapter 3](#)—that raged across the Northern Plains, in which the Oceti Sakowin defended against US military invasion and counterinsurgency tactics. By the turn of the twentieth century, Indigenous people had been largely confined to ever-dwindling reservations. The Oceti Sakowin, however, confronted the US military—the Army Corps of Engineers—again in the mid twentieth century, as US policy turned to the use of large-scale river development to continue the project of Indigenous dispossession—with policymakers attempting, all the while, to relieve themselves of the responsibilities outlined in the treaties.

In [chapter 4](#), I outline these schemes through the story of the mid-century Pick-Sloan Plan, which authorized the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation to dam the main stem of the Missouri River. These dams specifically targeted and destroyed Native lives and lands, with 611,642 acres of land condemned through eminent domain, 309,584 acres of which were vital reservation bottomlands. Flooding also forced more than a thousand Native families to relocate, in patent violation of treaties and without prior consent. The memory of this experience was still fresh at the #NoDAPL camps.

[Chapter 5](#) outlines the story of the urban-centered American Indian Movement (AIM) and their 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation—the culmination of more than a decade of Red Power organizing. This became the catalyst for a mass gathering of

thousands at Standing Rock in 1974, which resulted in the founding of the International Indian Treaty Council—a body that would eventually lead international efforts for Indigenous recognition that have had a deep, global significance.

[Chapter 6](#) traces the history of twentieth-century Indigenous internationalism—particularly, the Ojibwe's central role in spearheading the four-decade-long campaign for Indigenous recognition at the United Nations, which was the basis for the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The global Red Power movement eventually became a catalyst for the contemporary #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock. [Chapter 7](#) draws out these links, reflecting upon the ways our past and present struggles are connected, as they are to *both* past and present international anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements around the world.



Two-Spirit Nation leads a march to the police line. October 2016. Photo by author.